NF

ISSUE #65: TIERS OF THE KINGDOM

ADVANCE WARS 1+2: RE-BOOT CAMP

MINA THE HOLLOWER

OCTOPATH TRAVELER II

KIRBY'S RETUR
TO DRE

CERE
LOST DEM

THE SUPER MARIO BROS. MOVIE

CHARACTER PROFILE: GANONDORF

SEA OF STARS

SAMBA DE AMIGO: PARTY CENTRAL

TOXIC CRUSADERS

HISTORY OF HYRULE

MAY/ JUNE 2023

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA™ TEARS OF THE KINGDOM

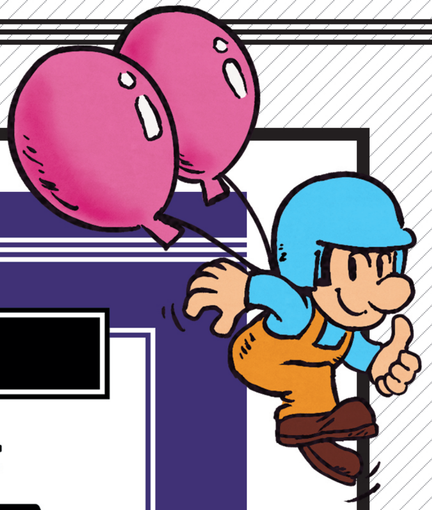
ANNOUNCEMENT!
NF BOOKS KICKS OFF ON KICKSTARTER!

WE'RE DOING IT! After more than a decade of producing fine magazines, we're finally expanding to also encompass book publishing!

NF Books will allow us to revisit topics and themes we've touched on in past NF Magazine issues, and go into much more depth and detail than the normal magazine format usually allows. To this day, our single most popular issue is still "Thank You, Mr. Iwata!" from 2015, published shortly after the legendary Satoru Iwata passed away that summer. That issue celebrated his life and achievements, but only about 30 pages or so got to focus on that topic — since it was still a normal NF issue too, it also had to include things like a preview of Yo-kai Watch and our review of Super Mario Maker. Well, no more sharing the page count!

The all-new book "The Impact of Iwata" will pack 220+ pages with an in-depth look back at his incredible career, covering all the well-known high points of his tenures at HAL and Nintendo (like the time he swooped in and saved EarthBound with his ingenious programming skills) to much lesser-known facts and stories that we didn't get a chance to include in that NF issue eight years ago. It will blend text together with screenshots of his work, quotes from the man himself and colleagues who worked alongside him, and beautiful full-color illustrations to introduce each of 16 different chapters — bringing back some great art first seen in 2015, as well as dozens of pieces of brand-new art newly commissioned just for this book!

It's coming to Kickstarter on May 30, 2023, starting at 1:00 p.m. Eastern/10:00 a.m. Pacific! If you're reading this, you're one of the most dedicated Nintendo Force fans. So please support this new project! I'll send a notice to all active Patrons as we get closer to launch. Watch for it! **— LUCAS**



岩田さんの影響

THE IMPACT OF IWATA

BY LUCAS M. THOMAS

UNEXPECTED RESTOCK!

KEEPING TRACK OF over 10 years' worth of print magazines is tough.

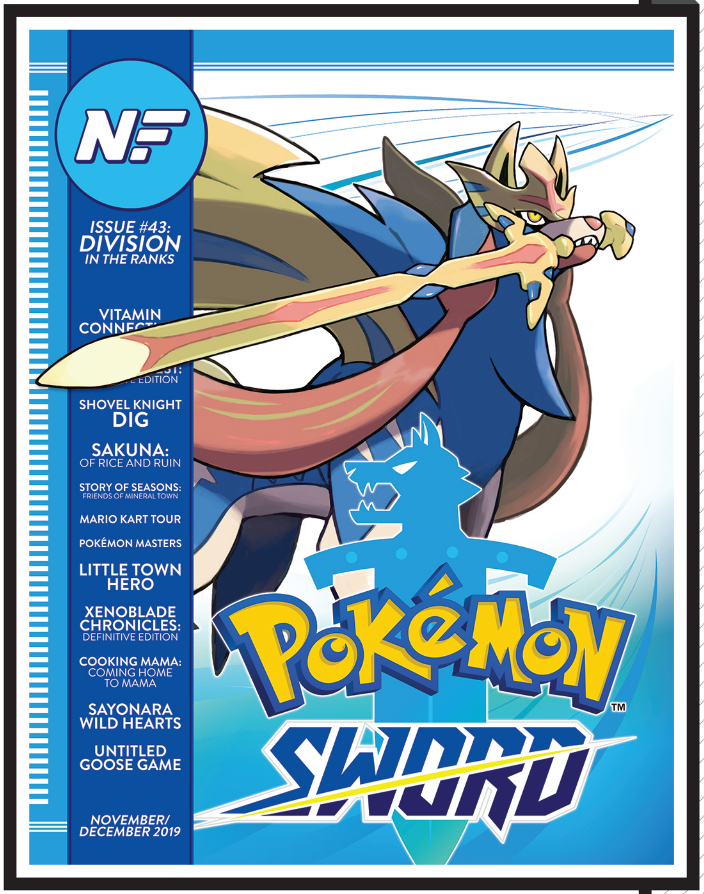
I have a fairly organized system in place now, which facilitates reasonably fast turnaround times between orders for older issues coming in through our website store and actually getting those orders into the mail. But the behind-the-scenes workings of NFMagazine.com clearly haven't always been so smooth and streamlined, as evidenced by the fact that I recently literally stumbled across a couple of boxes of back issues that I'd thought were totally sold out years ago!

I was fumbling in the dark through my set-aside magazine storage space when I honestly tripped on a box filled with copies of our Mother 3 issue, NF #21. And even more unexpectedly, I also stubbed a toe or two on a few extra boxes of NF #43, the stock of which I'd also thought was depleted! My physical misfortune is your gain, though, particularly if you're one of our newer readers who's been hoping to assemble a more complete collection of previous NF years.

I've now readded the option to order physical copies of these two issues to our website shop, but be warned – the stock on both of these is limited! (Extremely limited in the case of #21.) I've made sure no other copies of these issues are still hiding in the shadows, so now when they're gone, they're *gone* gone. Better move fast! **– LUCAS**

NFMagazine.com or **NintendoForceMagazine.com**

Issue #21



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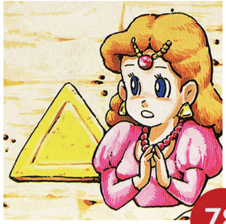
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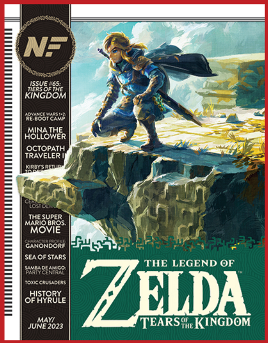


ON THE COVER

After a wait of over six years, it's finally time for another official sequel in the spectacular Legend of Zelda franchise! We of course had to award the honor of this issue's cover spot to Tears of the Kingdom, with perhaps the most pensive Link art that's ever been emblazoned across one of the series' boxes. He just looks like he's deep in thought, doesn't he? (Even though he's probably only thinking about where he should skydive back down to the surface to explore next.) Get ready for your own grand descents inside!

INBOX

LAYERS OF THE LANDSCAPE?

Everybody loves a good homonym, right?

The subtitle for the new Legend of Zelda sequel may be "Tears of the Kingdom," but I think "Tiers" will ultimately prove to be a more apt descriptor of its adventure. Because this game has taken the vast open overworld of Breath of the Wild and layered a whole 'nother explorable space on top of it: the sky!

Plenty of video games have offered expansive landscapes to roam across at this point, but I can't think of any other examples of games that stacked two open worlds on top of one another and gave you a bunch of different ways to travel up and down between the two. So we'll celebrate that unique approach to Hyrule's refined design in the central feature of this new NF issue!

We'll follow that up with a final preview of Tears of the Kingdom to dig deeper into some of the new gameplay mechanics Link will get to play around with in his latest quest, as well as a new Character Profile of Ganondorf to better prepare you for his rehydrated revival. For more Legend of Zelda love, check out our Interview section in which we talk to Ryan Clark (the only indie studio head ever entrusted with the Zelda brand), as well as our Community section talk with Melora Hart from History of Hyrule. She's a Legend of Zelda series artwork archivist! We even tossed in a fresh preview of Mina the Hollower, Yacht Club's upcoming adventure that takes a lot of inspiration from The Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening DX.

Zelda isn't the only big Nintendo topic right now, though! The Super Mario Bros. Movie has been soaring to stunning silver screen success, so we convened a Film Club to talk all about it, as well as writing up a separate review. This issue has its own layers, it seems!

LUCAS M. THOMAS, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

ISSUE #64:
MARCH/APRIL 2023

The fan response to our Nintendo 64-themed Issue #64 has been totally funtastic! Tons of people responded positively to our celebration of a game system that didn't get a lot of positive praise back when it was brand-new. It just took some time for everyone to be able to fully appreciate its 64-bit power, perhaps! We'll definitely plan more of these kinds of nostalgic issues in the future, so look forward to those. For now? Player's Poll responses, of course!

We did a hype check first, asking what level of excitement you've got as Tears of the Kingdom's launch day is approaching. Then, in recognition of Link's vast new variety of vehicles, we asked what your favorite methods of transportation in video games have been over the years. Finally, your final predictions for what role Zelda will play in the game. Here we go:

LETTERS

OF COURSE I'm excited!!! I'm just absolutely oozing with excitement! No, no, Splatoon, get outta here, not yet, haha! I will probably hold off until later, though, because my backlog is getting . . . literally . . . insane in the membrane! As far as transport . . . I like to fly high like a butterfly in the sky! Planes, jets, unicorns, whatever! You fly it, I'm inside it! Also . . . I hope Princess Zelda will be a tag-team co-op partner! WOW! Now that would be fun! Thanks NF! **— GINA**

Hello, this is Sam! Long-time subscriber! I have every issue! Here's my answers for the Poll!

I'm incredibly excited for Tears of the Kingdom! I work at the only game store in my town, and the buzz is amazing! It's really fun to see such overwhelming excitement for a game we still don't know too much about! Props to Nintendo for keeping the surprise alive and not spoiling the game with too many trailers!

My favorite mode of transportation would have to be from Final Fantasy XV! I love traveling with the Regalia! Being able to change the music and just watch the incredible breathtaking scenery that the game has to show is unlike any other experience!

My bet for Zelda's role in Tears of the Kingdom would be a return to something like in Ocarina of Time! Not to spoil it for those who haven't played the game, but I love the supporting-you-along-the-way type of character always working to assist behind the scenes.
— SAM

Help is only a Sheikah Slate away?

Excited is not nearly a strong enough word to describe how I feel about Tears of the Kingdom! My family has pre-ordered it and even paid an extra $10 to get it on the first day.

My favorite mount has got to be the Kuribo's Shoe in Super Mario Bros. 3.

"Link, lend me your power." This is Zelda's line, and why I think she'll be playable! **— HENRY L.**

Can't wait!!! I'm super excited for Tears of the Kingdom. I've been counting down the weeks. Just under two months as I'm writing this. It's been a while since I played a large exploration type game, and I could really use another experience like Breath of the Wild was. One of the few games that I actually pulled an all-nighter for. (I think two all-nighters, actually, during my playthrough.) Something about the exploration and the interaction with Link's surroundings . . . so immersive. Draws you in. Will I be there on Day 1? You might even say I'll be there *before* Day 1. If there's a midnight release, I want to be there early!

One of my favorite methods of travel was actually Link's Paraglider. Climbing to the top of a hill and then jumping towards a direction I want to explore? So satisfying.

If I had to choose what role Zelda will take, I'd guess she'll be a support character, but with a handful of situations where she's actually playable, just to change things up a bit. Zelda and Sheik are/were playable in Smash Bros., so I'm wondering if maybe Nintendo will do something similar here. **— J.M.**

PACKING UP THE POSTERS

Hey Nintendo Force!

I'm a married adult now, but in high school (and a few times when I would return home for breaks in college) I would put the posters I received from your magazines up on my walls in my childhood bedroom. As a process of taking out some of the random clutter I had left at my parents' for the past few years, I finally took down the posters, but thought you guys might enjoy seeing them all hung up before they all came down.

Thanks so much for all the memories! To many more years of Nintendo Force! (And maybe posters up in my kids' rooms one day!) **— ETHAN WHITTED**

Congrats on being a married adult, and hello, future Whitted family kids!

Anyone else out there want to send in photos of your poster-packed walls? We'd love to see 'em!

I'd like to give a shout-out to the Starship Mario from Super Mario Galaxy 2! I mean, what could be a better way to traverse the galaxy than a spaceship shaped like Mario's head? It's fun to see how other characters you meet along the way join you on your voyage as you go through the game. Possibly my favorite part of the Starship Mario, though, is its captain, the giant purple Luma named Lubba who always has something interesting to say. Especially when you go back after beating the main game: "What – you're back! I mean . . . HEY! YOU'RE BACK!" **– KEVIN JOHNSON**

I'm excited, because diving back into a Breath of the Wild game with those kinds of mechanics? What's not to be excited about?! **– KAHLE**

I've been a big Legend of Zelda fan since the first one I played: Majora's Mask on the Wii Virtual Console (RIP), and one of my favorite games of all-time is The Wind Waker. So of course I'm hyped for Tears of the Kingdom! In fact, it's currently the only Day 1 pickup I have scheduled for this whole year!

As for a vehicle I'm excited for, it's gotta be the new Jeep-looking thing. Land vehicles are where it's at – crashing into enemies or driving off cliffs can't be beat. The tactile feel and sense of gravity are things that don't usually carry over into the floatier air or water rides.

Is Zelda going to be playable? I'll be very surprised if she is. In my opinion she will, at most, have playable segments of some sort that can only be accomplished by her. But in all likelihood she'll be a simple NPC once again. **– DOMINICO**

I am very excited for The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom. I got Breath of the Wild way back when, and stopped playing halfway through the campaign in 2020. I just picked it back up and beat it in 2023! I didn't have a lot of open-world game experience like BotW (I was raised on A Link to the Past), but after playing other open-world action games, I felt more at ease and the game was much more fun! I will be getting Tears of the Kingdom when it releases.

I think the teleportation through rock/ground is the coolest idea and I cannot wait to try it out!

I am so torn about Zelda's role. I'd love for them to break form and let you control Zelda, or at least give her agency within the game. I hope they are misleading us by not showing her much, but I feel like she's going to befall something bad and Link has to fix it, per usual. **– STEPHEN G.**

I like the Skells in Xenoblade X. More games need giant robots that can fly around, punch giant monkeys and default on car insurance. **– ZEEBOR**

The reason why I am excited to play is because there are going to be new enemies and a new Master Sword. It also just looks fun overall. I will hold off until later to purchase it and wait to see others try it. **– QUINN WADE**

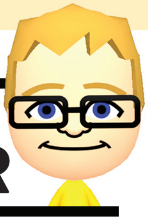
Hello, it's me, your now-almost-14-year-old fan, Ben. I won a game a while back in Issue #41 when I was 10. It doesn't seem like that long ago! Anyways, I'm here to answer some questions for a chance to win maybe the greatest Zelda game that exists.

I have high hopes for this game! I am very excited to play this game because it gives me a reason to use my Switch again – I haven't used it in a while.

My favorite method of transportation from any Legend of Zelda game has to be the ocarina, because who doesn't like a musical instrument that can teleport you? (I also own a replica ocarina, so I'm kinda biased about this.)

I personally think Zelda will be a tag team co-op character, because this game is the sequel to Breath of the Wild and Link has already saved Zelda, so I would be surprised if she was captured again. **– YOUR ALMOST-14-YEAR-OLD FAN, BEN**

CARTER'S CORNER



Hi again!

The answer to the Nintendo 64 quiz is . . . Super Mario 64! I get to play it sometimes at my grandparents' house. It's tricky and confusing sometimes, but it's a lot of fun.

Speaking of tricky, I made two more impossible levels in Super Mario Maker 2! The first is called Impossible Maze. In this Super Mario Bros. Ghost House level, you must make your way through rooms that look exactly alike with a harsh time limit. (Course ID: 31G-MX6-QRF.)

The next is called Truly Impossible. Perhaps it's my hardest level yet, because it has hidden objects, tricky sections and puzzling areas. Can you beat it? (Course ID: 1G5-746-7YF.)

As you're reading this I'll probably be working on another Super Mario Odyssey speedrun, and after that I'll play the new Zelda because I like the fusing ability.

Quiz time! Is there a 50-Coin hidden in Truly Impossible? Have fun searching that tricky level. See you next time!

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MARIO MICROFIGURES MEET MIGHTY MAX!

I always look forward to getting the latest copy of your magazine, so I had to share how excited I was to see the Mario Movie microfigure sets! These remind me of another classic hero who wore a red cap with an "M" on it . . . Mighty Max! I don't know how many people remember Mighty Max these days (probably better known as Polly Pocket's "brother"), but he was a regular kid with a magical "Cosmic Cap" that let him warp through portals. The playsets were intricate dioramas that usually closed up into monster heads. Thanks very much for all of the fantastic issues of Nintendo Force! Keep up the great work! **– JOSEPH PATRICK PASCALE**

I'm happy that some people get to enjoy setting up scenes like this in their homes. If I were to try it, half the microfigures would get lost, destroyed or swallowed in 24 hours.

THE PLAYER'S POLL

Congratulations to **Gina**, the winner of our most recent Player's Poll! Your new chance to win is below, and this time around we're interested to read your responses to three questions inspired by the Pikmin series!

QUESTION #1

Have you ever played any of the Pikmin games? If so, what did you think? If not, are you planning to make the new Pikmin 4 your first?

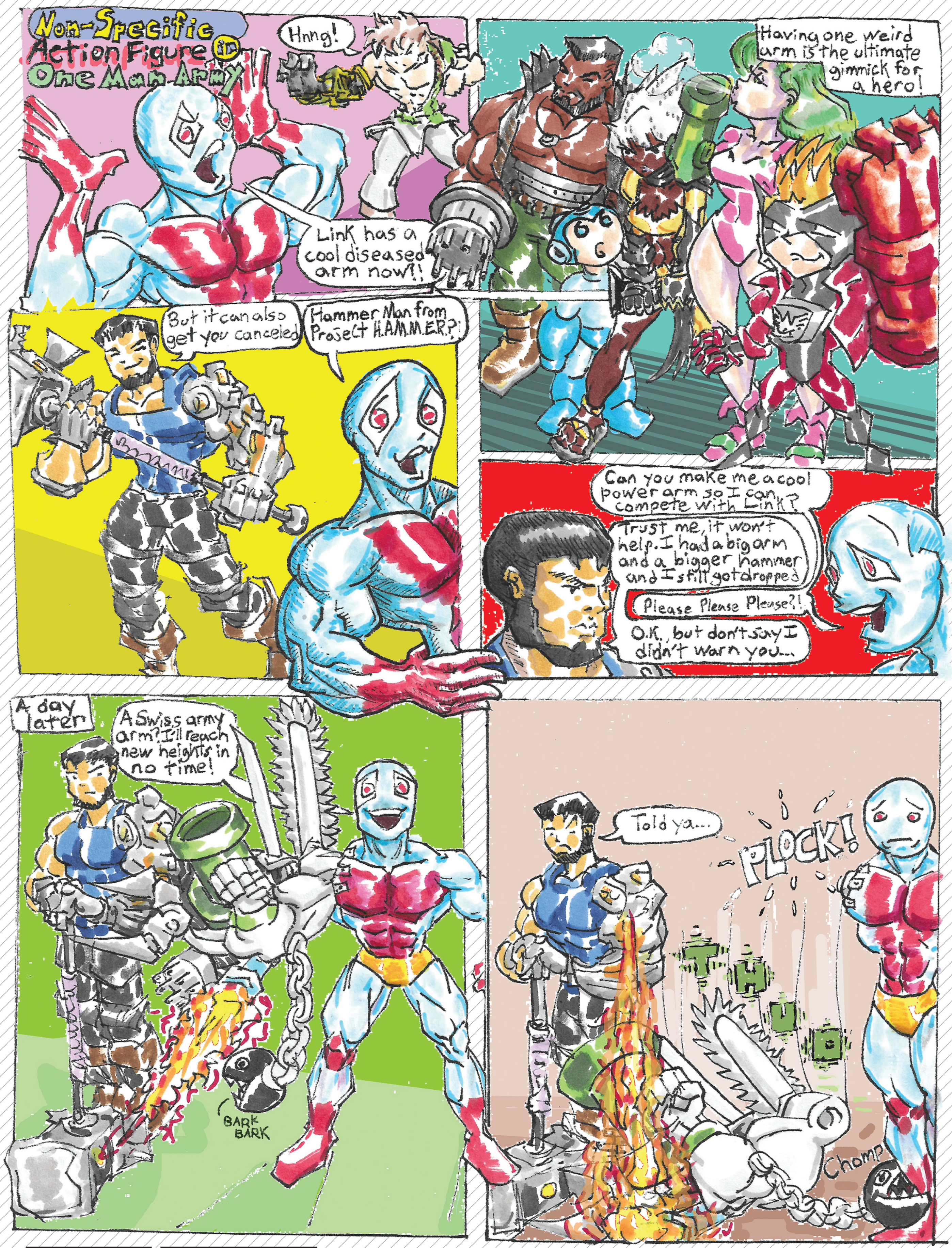
QUESTION #2

Imagine you had the power to shrink yourself (like Ant-Man). What would you do at such a small size? (The size of a Pikmin!)

QUESTION #3

Pikmin 4 is bringing us a new type of Pikmin: the freezing Ice Pikmin! If you could invent your own new kind of Pikmin, what would it be?

Send your responses to **PlayersPoll@NFMagazine.com** with the subject line "Player's Poll for Issue #66" – this time, one reader whose answers are picked for print will win the all-new adventure of Pikmin 4! Good luck!



BY JONATHAN HOLMES PUNCHLINE BY RYAN HOLMES

NF Adventures at PAX East 2023

Members of the Force were on the show floor, and they're ready to share their report!

PAX EAST WAS back in Boston again this year, and NF team members were in attendance to take in all the sights, sounds and feelings.

Nintendo was all over the show this time around, starting with a Super Mario Bros. Plumbing van outside, with workers giving out Mario Bros. magnets and keychains. Then inside the main entrance was a life-sized Tears of the Kingdom Link statue! My Nintendo members who lined up for a photo got a Tears of the Kingdom pin just for checking in! Surprisingly enough, the lines for this attraction were never very long.

The same was true for the other PAX-exclusive giveaways Nintendo offered up on the show floor, including a Splatoon 3 bag and matching set of pins. I was able to stroll up and get them all without any wait, all while other fans took in the Splatoon 3 and Mario Kart 8 Deluxe tournaments in the VS. Arena in the back.

This could be because the show was much less crowded than it was before 2020, and for good reason: Masks were required for all attendees, which was just one of the ways the shadow of COVID continued to hang over the event. Maybe that's why so many of PAX East 2023's most popular games combined horror elements with something comforting. People are still scared of the virus, and developers

have had a few years to reflect on that fear, consciously or subconsciously, with games that both validated people's anxiety while helping them find some levity in the process.

Probably the #1 game of the show was the new Toxic Crusaders title from Retroware. Under the watch of Sam Beddoes, creator of the Angry Video Game Nerd Adventures games, this new beat-'em-up clearly takes some cues from Shredder's Revenge, the biggest game of PAX East 2022. It's a fitting connection, as the Toxic Avenger, the leader of the crusaders, debuted in an R-rated horror comedy film in 1984, the same year the first Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles comic was released! You could say that these two nuclear weirdos grew up together, but Toxie remained relatively underground while his shelled cousins took off for the stars. You wouldn't know that from the way fans responded to seeing him in person, though! He was taking selfies left and right. I'm sure the free cans of Toxic Crusaders slime he was handing out didn't hurt either.

A stone's throw from Toxie were booths for a variety of other games that were similarly gross, silly, scary and/or nostalgic. Physical NES cartridges for a new Garbage Pail Kids title, from iam8bit and Retrotainment, were on sale just 20 feet or so away. A few steps from there was The Behemoth, who had Alien Hominid: Invasion, the silly sci-fi sequel to the GameCube's Alien Hominid from 2004, on multiple screens. A few steps further was Mina the Hollower (previewed on Page 46), another new title that mixes creepy stuff with inviting retro visuals. Dread XP, a developer that only releases horror games, was set up nearby as well. They were showing off Amanda the Adventurer and a couple of other titles that parody children's TV shows, pairing their family-friendly veneer with dark and terrible secrets. And towering over all of them was Devolver's massive Cult of the Lamb shrine; a giant looming structure dedicated to the loss of cartoon animals. Only true fans of this freaky, funny, feel-bad game would understand. Everyone else was left mystified!

If creepy-but-cute games won PAX East 2023, then the runner-up in that ridiculous, purely fictitious competition would be the concept of online celebrities. Having a well-known YouTuber or Twitch streamer at your booth was easily the best way to draw a crowd. Even more so than free slime! Videogamedunkey, who's publishing a new game called Animal Well with former Nintendo exec Dan Adelman, had a perpetual line to see him and the game he's representing. The same was true for Jirard "The Completionist" Khalil, who's co-producing an excellent new action platformer called Elsie, and James "Angry Video Game Nerd" Rolfe, who made a brief appearance with Toxie at the Retroware booth.

Having physical merch to sign helped too! Bannon Rudis (interviewed in NF #60) drew huge crowds at Limited Run with his River City Girls 2 exclusive cover signing, and the folks at Mega64 were similarly inundated with fans clamoring for shirts, books and videos. They were even kind enough to pose with a copy NF #64, which they seemed to genuinely enjoy!

For me personally, the highlight of the show was working directly with Maggie Jones Lutey, NF's resident JRPG expert. I went with Maggie on one of her trips to the NIS America showcase, and she did her best to teach me what makes the Trails games so special. While playing the newest, unreleased Trails title – Trails into Reverie, coming to the Switch in July – she audibly gasped when an old villain showed up to put the kibosh on a ceremony for a city state seeking independence. A cosplayer behind her (dressed as Ghost from Call of Duty) seemed equally amazed. Her passion for these games is contagious, and I definitely caught some from her!

And that's PAX at its best – a real-life place for people to get together and share their joy of video games. If you go to the show next year and see us, don't forget to say "Hi!" With any luck, I'll even have a free magazine for you! **– JONATHAN**

Daruk is Now Ready to Roll!

Just in time for the sequel, First 4 Figures' set of Breath of the Wild Champions is finally complete.

FIRST 4 FIGURES has officially announced the inevitable fourth Champion from Breath of the Wild, Daruk. I mean, they couldn't leave out the Goron brute, could they? With his arrival, all four original Champions can reunite in PVC form.

Each of them has had an exclusive and regular version, with the exclusive always having the light-up base that started with Zelda's release and was retroactively added for Link. Daruk debuted at a whopping $170, whereas Urbosa was $150 and Revali and Mipha were $125. The pricing makes sense, as Daruk is so much larger than the others! He'll be almost 12" tall and a little over 11" wide, so sadly he will not be in scale with the other champs, but if he was we might be paying double and looking for three times the shelf space! He will be holding his Boulder Breaker, just as all of his comrades have been featured with their signature weapons. It will be the last quarter of 2023 until we see the full set all together, but it will be worth the wait!

F4F has also been working diligently on other properties as well, including Bee Banjo from Banjo-Kazooie. That resin statue is $280 and follows Crocodile Banjo in the transformations series. It's one of only a few F4F offerings that doesn't have an exclusive version. They do have a combo with both Mumbo Jumbo and Croc Banjo that would go nicely with it, if you're a Banjo superfan who's flush with cash!

Tails from Sonic has also been announced as a huge polystone statue costing $500 for a regular, $510 for an exclusive or $585 for the definitive, though pre-order prices provide some savings for buying early. The definitive version comes with lighting, Wisps on the base and interchangeable arms. Tails arrives in the first quarter of 2024.

Another statue on the docket is the Oki in human form from Okami. This one is $600 for the definitive edition and he comes with two arm sets for different poses with his blade, Kutone. He will be released in the summer of 2024.

The Latest from LEGO Mario

It's the LEGO series that just can't be stopped! Even more sets are on the way soon!

MARIO DAY THIS year yielded some LEGO Super Mario news, revealing new products. LEGO Donkey Kong was revealed, and while he isn't interactive like Mario, Luigi and Peach, his arrival means that several themed sets are likely incoming. Also announced was a Dry Bowser expansion, which has Dry Bowser, a Blaarg and a Dry Piranha along with an intimidating castle entrance featuring a stone Bowser. More should be shown in the coming months, as August 1 is the day for more new stuff to drop. Can we also talk about how they're locking the Koopalings behind some less-than-stellar sets? Wendy is in a non-descript filler set and Ludwig is among some rehashed elements of Peach's castle. Roy and Morton Jr. are the only two left. Hopefully they'll be better placed!

Super Licca-chan

She's all dolled up in Mario's clothes!

WHO IS LICCA? She's one of the most popular dolls in Japan, and has worn all sorts of different fashions, work uniforms and costumes since her debut in the late 1960s. This past Mario Day, she debuted her Mario cosplay!

Takara Tomy's "Licca-chan Loves Super Mario" doll features Licca wearing Mario's iconic blue denim overalls and red M hat, along with a Question Block-shaped tote bag, cutouts of various Mario items, brown workboots and shiny star earrings! The doll also comes with a reversible diorama that depicts both Licca's bedroom bedecked in Super Mario memorabilia as well as a background scene straight out of the Mushroom Kingdom.

You can find her at Amazon.jp or specialty stores such as AmiAmi or Hobby Link Japan for around $40 before shipping.

Evil Mani-Mani Attacked!

Now you too can keep EarthBound's sinister statue in your very own home!

THE HOBONICHI MOTHER PROJECT is at it again with rare exclusive Mother merchandise, this time producing a Mani Mani Statue. Serving as the catalyst for all of the evil in the first half of EarthBound, this little statue enhances the worst in people and makes them do terrible things for fame and power. Mr. Carpainter used it to create the cult of Happy Happyists, while Geldegarde Monotoli used it to control Fourside and create an alternate evil version called Moonside. This nearly eight-inch statue costs 9,999 yen and will ship in late May. Pre-orders are closed, but the secondhand market still offers a possibility of snagging one. As of now, there are no plans to restock on the site. If you do manage to purchase one, just don't go painting everything blue!

BY BRETT MARTIN & REBECCA RUDRANATH

A New Era

. . . of Pokémon anime!

ASH KETCHUM'S JOURNEY has indeed come to an end.

After his explosive victory against the undefeated Leon at the end of the World Coronation Series, Ash, the protagonist of the Pokémon anime ever since it started all the way back in the '90s, became the #1 Pokémon Trainer in the world. It seemed like the kind of moment that could mark the end of his time on the show – and sure enough, that has been confirmed to be the case. He did get a small series of epilogue episodes to wrap up his decades-long story more completely, though, and those should be made available in dubbed English in the near future.

But where will the show go from here? Well, the next chapter of Pokémon's anime adventures has just kicked off in Japan, as no time has been wasted in passing the torch to a new set of heroes!

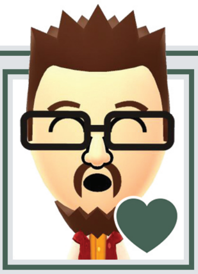
Taking Ash's spot as the lead human character of the show is a girl named Liko. She wears a strange (potentially magical?) pendant around her neck, and her first partner Pokémon is Sprigatito! It'll be interesting to see if this Sprigatito, like Ash's Pikachu, remains unevolved.

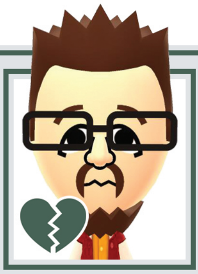
Liko's human traveling companion is a boy named Roy. (And I instantly want him to become so popular that he's added to Super Smash Bros. – then we'd have three different Roys in the same game!) He owns a mysterious ornate Poké Ball, and he's on a quest to challenge Legendary Pokémon to battle him. His partner is a Fuecoco!

Rounding out the new crew is an adult character: a Pokémon professor named Friede. He has a Charizard (because of course he does) and also a Pikachu that goes by the name of Captain Pikachu! Ash's Pikachu has been retired from the series alongside Ash himself – but there was no way the anime wouldn't find a way to continue featuring the franchise's main monster mascot in a prominent role!

This new Pokémon anime series just launched on April 14 in Japan. Hopefully we won't have to wait too long for a dubbed version to reach the West! **– LUCAS**

Great!
I'm excited to watch new heroes begin their journey!





Oh.
I'm going to miss seeing Ash and *his* Pikachu!

FORECAST

A meteorological look at the biggest game and DLC releases currently scheduled to debut in the next few months.

THE WAIT IS almost over! Originally announced almost four years ago at E3 2019, "The Sequel to Breath of the Wild" is now heading to store shelves as this magazine ships to mailboxes. It'll go on sale officially on May 12, and it's sure to dominate the charts for months (and even years!) beyond that point! We've got two final pre-release articles prepared: our central feature starting on Page 29, and a final preview on Page 39.

NOT TOO MANY games are daring to launch in the immediate wake of Tears of the Kingdom, with the next big-name release not scheduled until over a month later. Sega's Sonic Origins Plus will speed into stores on June 23, adding a dozen new Game Gear games to the set of four Genesis adventures that originally made up Origins. See Page 51!

CONTINUING WITH SEGA news, we've got a new brand revival to look forward to! (When a series has been asleep for 15 years, I'm going to call the release of a new sequel a revival.) Samba de Amigo is back for the first time since its 2008 Wii installment, with the new Party Central game set for release at some point in June. It doesn't have a locked-in exact date yet! Read more about it by flipping ahead to Page 43.

NINTENDO MAY HAVE a surprise in store for the month of June themselves (they've been known to drop Spring software with little to no notice ahead of time), but as we go to press with this edition, the next confirmed first-party release date isn't until July, when Pikmin 4 is due to debut on the 21st. We'll have an in-depth final look in our next issue!

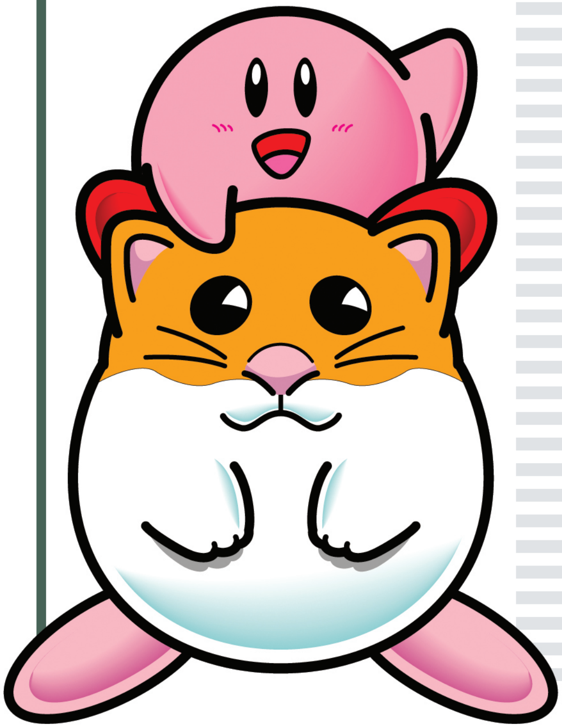
IT'S BEEN NEARLY 20 years since I was a young man rounding out my college experience with some time kicking around in graduate school, and the original Baten Kaitos definitely distracted me from fully engaging in higher academia. It was a fairly scholarly pursuit in its own right, of course! I wonder if I'll find the time to revisit it now that it's coming to the Switch later this summer. Read more on Page 44!

ONE GAME THAT I absolutely know I'll find the time to play is this spiritual successor to Chrono Trigger – especially since it's set to launch on my birthday: August 29! If you'd like to celebrate your favorite magazine editor turning one year older, then please also treat yourself to this title on that same day. You can learn more about it on Page 47!

> With Tears of the Kingdom finally being sent out into the wild and the similarly long-time-in-development Pikmin 4 hot on its heels, Nintendo might be about to ease off the gas where Switch releases are concerned and start stockpiling whatever other games they've got in the works, holding on to them until the "Switch 2" is ready. Or maybe they'll ramp things up again and we'll have another big push for Switch 1! We'll see in the months ahead! – **LUCAS**

YOUR DAY HAS just been blessed by a rare appearance of front-facing Rick the Hamster! Say "Hi!!" to Rick in your very best Kirby voice! Then head over to the Nintendo Switch Online Game Boy app and meet him for the first time all over again in Kirby's Dream Land 2, which is newly available there. It's the first appearance of all three of Kirby's original animal buddies: Rick (of course), as well as Coo the Owl and Kine the Fish!

More Kirby fun is on the horizon for that same Game Boy app, too, as Nintendo has promised that the trailblazing motion control adventure from the Game Boy Color, Kirby Tilt 'n' Tumble, is also coming to the NSO lineup soon. It will be that game's first ever re-release! Its original cartridge had an accelerometer built into it, which has made porting it to a home platform too tricky for Nintendo to try in the past. But they seem to have found a solution using the Switch Joy-Cons!



Adventures Beyond Paldea

Take a first look at where we'll go and who we'll meet in the DLC expansion of Pokémon Scarlet & Violet!

DO YOU KNOW Momotaro?

A centuries-old folk tale in Japan, the legend of Momotaro tells the story of a boy who's mysteriously born from a peach. He grows up to become a hero, and together with a dog, monkey and pheasant as companions, he journeys to an island full of monsters who've been terrorizing the people of Japan. The fruit-born human and his three animal allies fight and defeat the evil creatures, then return to the mainland as triumphant heroes!

. . . Now what does that have to do with Pokémon? Well, it seems the DLC expansion for Scarlet & Violet will be adapting this classic story – at least in part.

When players set out on the new quest in The Teal Mask (the name of Part 1 of the two-part DLC), they'll find themselves traveling beyond Paldea to a new land named Kitakami. There, they'll encounter three new Pokémon: one apiece inspired by the dog, the monkey and the pheasant who fought alongside Momotaro in the old story!

That's just the beginning, though, as a fourth new face looms over all – or rather, a hidden face. It's the new Legendary Pokémon Ogerpon, based on the villains Momotaro battled!

OKIDOGI

A big, burly, bipedal canine, Okidogi has a name that seems conflicted with its demeanor: It's not OK at all!

MUNKIDORI

This hunky-dory monkey, though, seems to be named a bit more aptly: All seems cool and calm with it.

FEZANDIPITI

Finally, this bird fuses "pheasant" and "serendipity" to make its name. Will it truly bring good fortune?

Now, you may be wondering why the DLC for the Paldea region – which was based on Spain – would focus on a Japanese folk tale and take place in an entirely new, non-Spain-based land. Honestly, I have no idea! I feel like The Pokémon Company kind of loses the plot as they continue to develop each new generation of the series now. The first expansion to Sword & Shield, after all, similarly swept those main games' setting aside to introduce an entirely unrelated island themed around martial arts training!

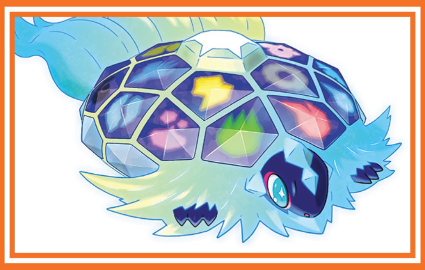
Also like Sword & Shield's DLC, the expansion of Scarlet & Violet will have a second part that takes place in yet another new location. The Indigo Disk, as Part 2 will be called, will bring us to the Blueberry Academy, a rival school seeking to assert its dominance over Paldea's Naranja/Uva Academy. Again, it's hard to find much of a thematic connection here yet – unless it's all somehow fruit-based, tying in to Momotaro being born out of a peach? But then we haven't seen a Momotaro-inspired character yet – just Pokémon based on the supporting characters in the story.

And even more mysteries abound! The promo art for Part 2, seen above, has been analyzed by artists and is assumed to be incomplete: Whatever Pokémon the Blueberry Academy Trainers will use in battle are, so far, absent from the relatively empty spots on the right side of the image. Could they be more all-new Pokémon, and The Pokémon Company doesn't yet want them to be revealed? We are still several months away from the release of even Part 1, after all – they surely don't want to play all their promotional cards for both DLC halves yet.

Finally, the collective name for both DLC parts is The Hidden Treasure of Area Zero. Which gets another "huh?" from me! What will that central piece of Paldea have to do with adventures that seem to take place totally beyond the borders of the main game's land mass? And what's the deal with the glowing turtle? And who are Carmine and Kieran?! Ack! Hopefully we'll get more concrete info soon! **– LUCAS**

OGERPON

The "Box Legendary" of the boxless Part 1 of the DLC, Ogerpon seems like a mask-wearing mischief maker.



TERAPAGOS

The face of Part 2, Terapagos may be a "world turtle" that can tap into any type of Terastallization!

CARMINE & KIERAN

This pair of siblings somehow find themselves at the center of both DLC parts. What role will they play?

GET BACK ON THE DANCE FLOOR

Brace yourself for Crypt of the NecroDancer's new DLC expansion, as well as the brand-new Rift of the NecroDancer!

AT WHAT POINT has a video game become too old to continue getting DLC expansions? Mario Kart 8 is about to turn 9, but Nintendo's still adding to it through the Booster Course Pass – it'll be nearly a decade old by the time that's done! Perhaps following that example, the developers at Brace Yourself Games have revealed that new DLC for Crypt of the NecroDancer is coming soon – even though its base game is now over eight years old itself!

Crypt of the NecroDancer's next addition is called Synchrony, and it will appropriately task multiple players to stay in sync with one another as they delve into more dangerous dancing dungeons. (NecroDancing, to this point, has been a solo activity. But dancing's always more fun with friends!) Each player will have the chance to choose from three new heroes, too, in addition to the series' lead shoveler, Cadence.

Speaking of Cadence, she'll also be stepping out to headline a brand-new spin-off soon too! Called Rift of the NecroDancer, it swaps out the original adventure's dungeon crawling for more of a variety platter of keep-the-beat challenges inspired by everything from Rhythm Heaven to Guitar Hero. (And even Punch-Out!!?) Wanting to learn more, we invited Ryan Clark from Brace Yourself to be our featured Interview section guest in this issue, so flip your way forward to Page 59 to get extra details on both of these new projects!

Crypt of the NecroDancer's 2015 release date might seem a little too far back into the past for it to still be getting new DLC here in 2023, but then again, tons of players of this series didn't discover it until they first played its 2019 Zelda crossover, Cadence of Hyrule. So it still feels a whole lot newer for all of them! **– LUCAS**

It's Time to Clean up the Streets!

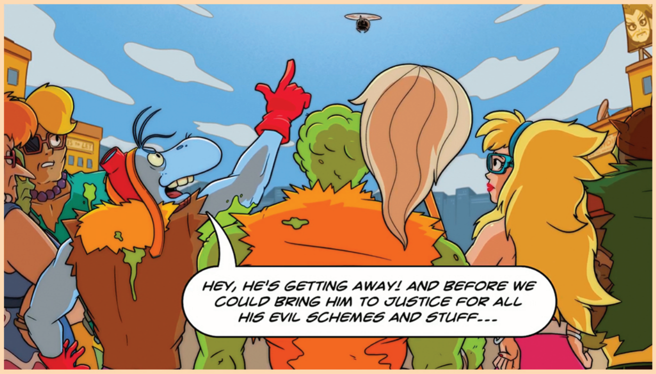
It's the triumphant return of Troma to the world of video games: Toxic Crusaders is getting a brand-new beat-'em-up!

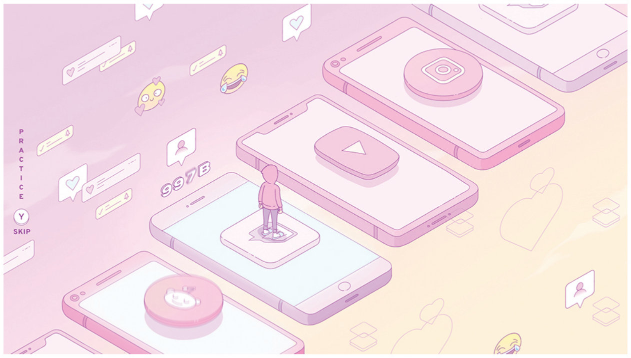
YOUR COLLEGE YEARS are the perfect time to expand your cinematic horizons. For me, that meant watching oddball anime from bootleg VHS tapes floating around my dorm, live-action imports like The Street Fighter (that's with Sonny Chiba, not Jean-Claude Van Damme) and, most eye-opening of all, a few films from Troma Entertainment. Those last ones were . . . well, they weren't appropriate for anyone under college age, I can safely say.

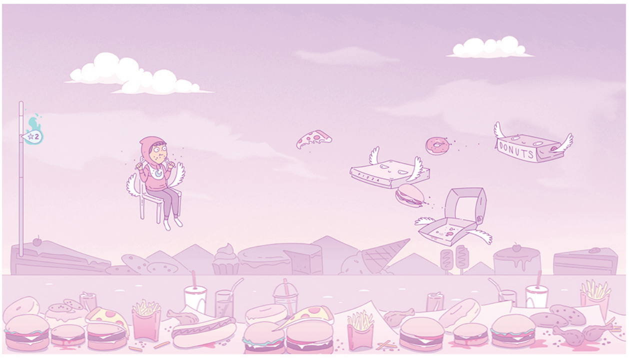
Troma's horrifyingly violent, overtly sexual and all-around shocking adults-only movies somehow inspired a safe-for-kids spin-off cartoon series in the early '90s: Toxic Crusaders. It was full of such goofy, slapstick, standard Saturday morning stuff that most who saw it surely never knew of its connections to the kind of films you'd have to walk behind a beaded curtain to rent at your local video store. That toon has now inspired a new game.

Retroware's new Toxic Crusaders game takes clear inspiration from the recent Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Shredder's Revenge, fusing a cartoon-accurate art style with modern beat-'em-up gameplay. We're even getting the same number of playable heroes! The seven pollution punishers include Toxie (a.k.a. "The Toxic Avenger"), his girlfriend Yvonne, his mother Mrs. Junko and his pals Major Disaster, Headbanger, Junkyard and No-Zone. Each of them is an absolute oddball. (No-Zone, for instance, can sneeze to attack foes with his huge nose, and one of his feet has been replaced by a wheel.) You'll pick your favorite weirdo and use him or her to bash the punks of Tromaville, New Jersey, into the pavement!

Feel free to let this news spark a new interest in the old Toxic Crusaders toon, but try to steer clear of Troma's live-action films, OK? **— LUCAS**







Heavenly Rhythm

MELATONIN

RHYTHM HEAVEN IS on hiatus. With the Wii U and 3DS eShops now shuttered, the most recent installments in Nintendo's own follow-the-beat franchise are no longer on sale in any official capacity. But before you lament your misfortune and open your wallet to pay an inflated auction price for a secondhand Rhythm Heaven Fever Wii disc on eBay, consider instead this budget-friendly alternative.

Half Asleep is the latest indie studio to recognize that Nintendo fell asleep on one of their IPs, so they've swept into the scene themselves to reawaken Rhythm Heaven's style of play with their own somnabulatory spin on the series: Melatonin. Named for the hormone your brain produces in order to help you sleep at night, this game tells the story of a slumbering 20-something and the dreams his subconscious creates – all of which just so happen to be perfectly timed to a metronome's beat and playable as rhythm minigames.

The scenarios are whimsical and diverse, and always beautifully illustrated. All focus on topics that young adults might very well be dwelling on as they drift off to dream land too: dating, trying to gain followers on social media, worries about money, food. (I'd take a few more food dreams myself.) The art is really incredible in every one, and matches perfectly with the rhythm gameplay layered on top of it.

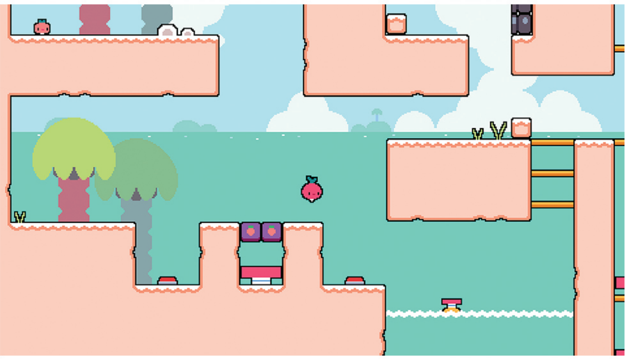
For example, in the dream about shopping, an array of several items on sale at a mall appear to a beat. You must memorize the rhythm of the order in which they appeared, then echo it with presses of the A Button – and each press of A causes an animation of your character swiping his credit card. Beep! Beep! Beep-Beep-Beep!

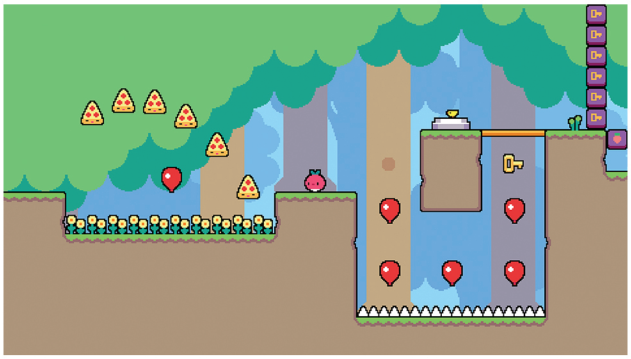
Keeping time with only A presses is sufficient for the earliest games, but then things ramp up with a bit more complexity as the next round of challenges tasks you to alternate between pressing L and R. That kind of control scheme is used for swiping left and right on a dating app, lifting dumbells with your left and right arms in the dream about exercise, and more. There are 16 different dream scenarios when it's all said and done, and I appreciated the thematic consistency the team went for here – that's definitely a change from Rhythm Heaven, in which each minigame has nothing to do with the next. One minute you're a ringside reporter interviewing a wrestler; the next you're a dog playing badminton in an airplane with a cat. (That's not a bad approach either, but it makes me wonder what a Rhythm Heaven with a consistent thematic through-line like this could be like.)

I do think Melatonin is set to be too difficult by default, but there is an options menu that lets you tweak things to be more forgiving, and making use of that functionality got me fully into the groove here. So I'll fully recommend this trip through dream land to all rhythm fans, while still hoping Nintendo reopens the gates to their Heaven in the future!
– LUCAS

9.5

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: HALF ASLEEP RATING: E10+





Get Your Veggies Once a Day!

DAILY DADISH

IF YOU'RE A parent, you've no doubt been in this scenario: You're napping on a cool summer day when a bird flies by and your many children run away to chase after it. You then have to track them all down through a series of increasingly bizarre areas filled with hazards and fast food-themed monsters.

Also, you're a radish.

This is the premise of the Dadish series, which is now on its fourth entry. Unlike the first three though, Daily Dadish has a unique hook: Every day there's a new level to play, but each stage is available for only 24 hours.

The Dadish series has earned its following thanks to a mastery of simple-to-understand gameplay and hilarious personality. There are no complicated moves to learn or bizarre gimmicks to wrap your head around. You have no offensive capabilities, and no way to defend yourself against attacks. You are a radish who can move and double jump, and that's about it.

The whole game is built around utilizing these simple mechanics to navigate a series of creative environments. You can't freeze time, there are no ability upgrades, nothing. Just jump, avoid traps and monsters, and make it to the end of the level to find your lost kids.

And those lost kids? They're the source of Daily Dadish's real secret weapon: hysterical writing. Every time you rescue one, you have a conversation with them, and these chats are often some of the funniest things I've ever read in a video game.

Dadish's kids are weird (just like real kids), and the look of exasperation on Dadish's face when talking to them about why they shouldn't eat sand or open up an ice cream dungeon in the desert is priceless.

As for what's new, Daily Dadish's biggest change is a sense of urgency. The original Dadish games featured collectable stars. They could be pretty tough to get, but you had no time limit or lives, so you could spend as long as you needed. In Daily Dadish, you get stars based on how quickly you complete a level, which can change things from a leisurely experience you take at your own pace into one that's more focused on speed. Stars are only used to unlock cosmetics, which makes them by no means necessary, but the levels themselves also only exist for one day at a time, so if you don't play every day (or aren't willing to mess with your system's internal clock), you're going to miss out on content.

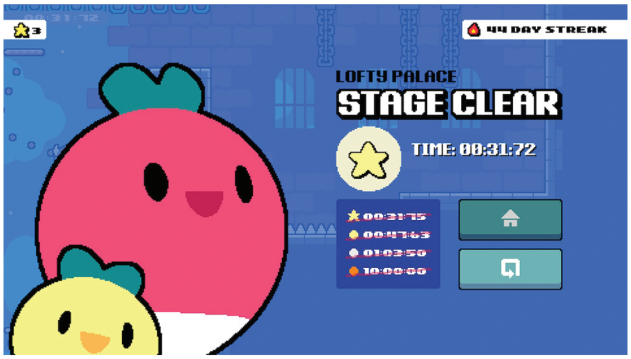
Fortunately, levels are short and sweet and perfect for quick sessions. I've played every day since the game launched in February and it's never taken me more than 15 minutes to reach a goal.

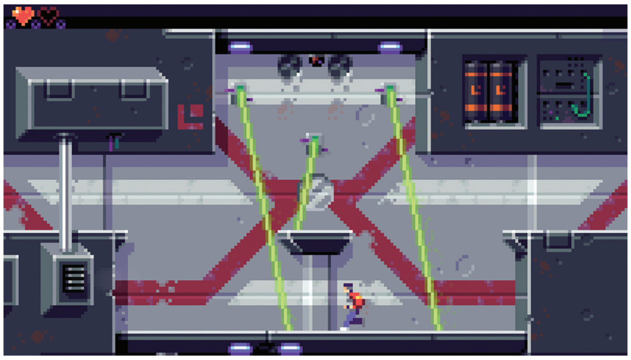
Its speed-orientated nature might be off-putting for some, and its daily level system makes long gameplay sessions nearly impossible, but these unique features are what make Daily Dadish such a special game. It may be sparse on flashy extras, but that's not the point. It's like Wordle, except instead of words it's talking radishes, tough-but-fair platforming and the occasional screeching possum.

Whether you're new to the Dadish games or you already know what a Burgurgular is, Daily Dadish is a great way to spend a few minutes a day. — **KRIS**

8.0

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: THOMAS K. YOUNG RATING: E





Return of the Cinematic Platformer

LUNARK

STICK WITH IT!

Sometimes when I'm playing a video game, I'll hit a rough patch. A sudden difficulty spike will strike, or I'll just be off my own rhythm. I'll get frustrated, and feel like I just want to quit – to just shut the game down and walk away. And sometimes I do just that!

But, in the case of Lunark, I'm happy that I stuck with it. I did run into a few rough patches as I made my way through this new homage to old-school cinematic platformers, but I persisted, pushed through and saw the credits roll after only a few sessions.

The problem I encountered – and one of my few complaints for this otherwise wonderfully crafted game – was inconsistent checkpoints. In some areas, it seems like losing a life has no penalty – your character, Leo, will simply respawn right where you fell, and you can instantly try again. In other areas, though, the respawn point is set something like a dozen screens backwards, forcing you to have to be near-perfect in running through a gauntlet of enemies and obstacles that seemed to last for 10 minutes or more. Again, I did stick with it and managed to overcome all of those challenges – but I definitely felt frustrated at having to play the same 10 minutes again and again to get it *just right* and finally reach the next checkpoint.

Lunark demands precision. While most video games allow players to fudge physics a bit or correct for misjudged jumps with double jump mechanics or "coyote time," this one is having none of that – you'll either move with expert intention, or you'll watch poor Leo lose another life. It's not a bad thing. It's perfectly in line with the games Lunark was inspired by, like Flashback, Out of This World and Prince of Persia. You just have to get yourself into the right headspace to play a game like this, understanding that while it looks like a 2D run-and-jump platformer, it's really more of a careful, thoughtful movement puzzle to solve instead.

It didn't click with me right away, but it did eventually. It could *maybe* give the player a little more leeway with recognizing button inputs, though – I did feel like some of my falls weren't entirely my fault, but rather the game not jumping when I told it to.

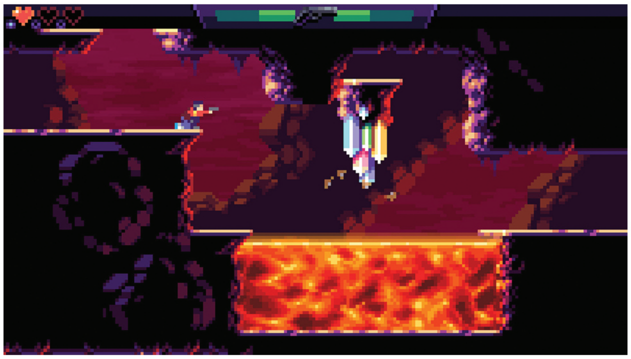
I mentioned the rotoscoped cut-scenes in our last issue, and they did indeed turn out to be a highlight in the full game – it's a really striking style that adds gravitas to otherwise mundane moments like bending down to pick up an item. In our last issue I also fretted about the severe lack of resolution in this intentionally overpixelated world, but that ended up not being much of a problem – items and characters are difficult to discern when they're built with fewer pixels than Mario got back in 1985, but the vibe works overall. If my 41-year-old eyes can parse these pixels, surely yours could too.

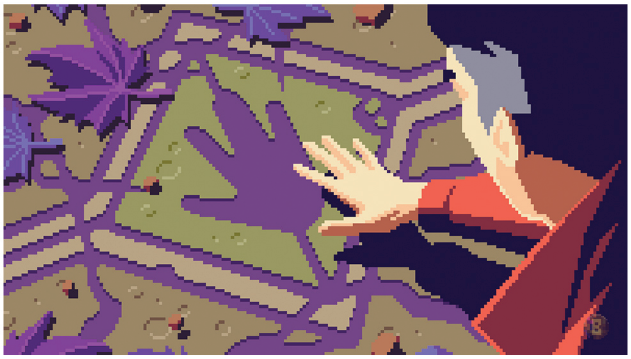
Gamers around my age, who were alive when this game's inspirations first hit the market, will be the ones who should most seriously consider jumping into Lunark. Younger Switch owners shouldn't dismiss it, though, as anyone who's willing to invest the handful of hours it takes to "get it" will ultimately love the entirety of its journey. Even the rough patches! Stick with it when you hit those!

– LUCAS

8.5

SWITCH PUBLISHER: WAYFORWARD
DEVELOPER: CANARI GAMES
RATING: E10+





Frustrations on the Fairway

NINTENDO SWITCH SPORTS: GOLF

FROM NOW ON, feel free to call me "Triple Bogey Thomas" – because that's just about the best score I could muster on any of the 18 holes in my first round of Nintendo Switch Sports' Golf mode.

It's been almost exactly one year since Nintendo Switch Sports first went on sale, but when it did so it wasn't quite complete – the Golf mode wasn't part of the package on Day 1. It was promised to be added as DLC later in 2022, and finally was in late November. I've been meaning to get around to testing it out ever since, and just found the time as the game's one-year anniversary neared.

It's just as well that I waited, since holy cow, what a frustrating uphill battle it is to learn the controls on this one!

I believe we've arrived at the point when video game motion controls have become *too* good, as it now feels like doing well in this kind of golf takes at least half of the skill that actually going outside to play the real sport would demand. The Joy-Con is so precisely sensitive to the movement of your arm and the angle of your wrist that you seriously need to be spot-on with your swings to achieve anything approaching success here on the Switch.

Wii Sports and even the more sensitive Wii Sports Resort didn't feel as strict as this – you could kind of fudge your way toward adequate play back in those days. (The Bowling mode could definitely be "tricked" with quick wrist flicks of the Wiimote, leading to easy strikes.) But now? No way. If you're going to get good at this Golf, you have to do it honestly.

And, honestly, I just didn't have much fun trying to do that. I can fully appreciate the precision with which Nintendo has programmed this modern hardware, but my body just isn't up to the daunting task of being able to consistently measure up to its lofty standard. I would line up for simple putts in this game, and sometimes they would go out with just the degree of strength I intended – *sometimes.* Much more often they'd register as a notch above or below the delicate exact level of oomph I was trying to apply, and the ball would swerve away from the hole or bounce off of it.

Especially frustrating were the times when a putt would have gone in if the pin had been treated like a real, physical object with collision! But it isn't. It just fades out of existence as the ball approaches, so what would have been a success was counted as another failure.

The game is gorgeous, and it is, for the most part, made very well. It is a great addition to the Switch Sports package, which felt thin when it first launched last year. And if you put in the time and effort (and you're in a little better shape than I am), then you could probably have plenty of fun hitting the links here.

But I'm going to stick with the likes of Mario Golf, where timed button presses offer me more control than actual motion control ever will. **– LUCAS**

7.0

DLC PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: NINTENDO RATING: E10+

The Additions are Accelerating!

MARIO KART 8 DELUXE: BOOSTER COURSE PASS – WAVE 4

MARIO KART 8 has been boosted once again, but with a plot twist this time: Nintendo added a new racer in addition to the additional tracks!

Returning to the Mario Kart roster after originally debuting in Double Dash is Birdo, the egg-spewing, bow-wearing one-time tag-team partner of Yoshi. And it's not just Birdo, but several different color variations of Birdo, some of which are brand-new!

Even more intriguing are the five new empty spots on the character select screen that now appear under Birdo's position, promising that at least that many more extra cast members will be added alongside Waves 5 and 6 in the months to come. Nintendo really seems to be ramping things up here in the back half of the Booster Course Pass!

The focus of Wave 4 remains the eight new courses, of course, and I'm pleased to report that we've received another solid set.

There are more city-inspired Tour tracks – three of the eight this time – and they're a bit more exciting than before. While having to drive through part of a parking garage in Bangkok is boring, the waterways and flower-filled fields of Amsterdam are interesting. The best of the Tour bunch this time is Singapore, though, as it's a visual spectacle that sends you sailing through the sky, flying through speed-boosting rings and just doing a great job of celebrating the architecture and illumination of its real-world inspiration.

The least fun of Wave 4 as a whole is Mario Circuit from Mario Kart DS, since it's just another basic, grass-lined track with Peach's Castle looming in the background – I've lost count of how many of those we already have. It does have fireball-spitting Piranha Plants, though.

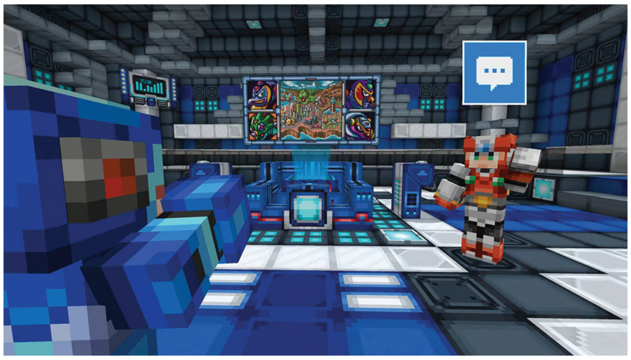
The award for biggest upgrade goes to GBA Riverside Park, which is now a gorgeous, twisting run over and around a river at sunset. Waluigi Stadium, making a return from the GameCube era, is also brilliantly embellished here on Switch, with a wonderfully textured muddy track that will banish your bad memories of how phoned-in some of the texture work seemed back in Wave 1 of this DLC. (Though I do hope a future system/sequel has the power to actually render permanent tire tracks through the muddy ground. That would be amazing!)

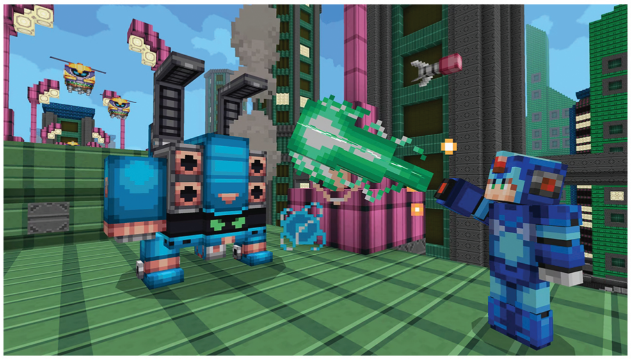
DK Summit is back from the Wii, and it's fine, but tricky – you need to pay close attention to the angles at which you approach the boost ramps lining its snow-covered slopes, or else you might find yourself boosting straight into a ravine.

Finally, the grand finale of Wave 4 is a bold, brand-new Yoshi's Island! It's an incredible original track that is a complete homage to the 1995 SNES classic, Super Mario World 2: Yoshi's Island. It manages to fit references to dozens of iconic characters and locations from that 16-bit masterpiece into its loop, and it's honestly the best such track Nintendo has ever made! It's pure delight from end to end for anyone who's ever played that game. (And if you haven't, you really should! It's in the SNES NSO app!) I would absolutely love to see more tracks given this great a degree of detail. We'll see if Waves 5 and 6 can match it! **— LUCAS**

9.5

DLC PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: NINTENDO RATING: E





Maverick Hunting Gets Blocky

MINECRAFT: MEGA MAN X DLC

MEGA MAN X is one of the all-time great single-player 2D action platformers. A relatively small adventure, each of its 12 levels are expertly designed obstacle courses, densely packed with exciting challenges. Minecraft is its opposite in almost every way. A giant open-world multiplayer 3D survival game, it allows players to create almost anything out of different types of blocks. If it were possible to combine the best aspects of these two titles together, you'd have a game that could appeal to basically everyone!

Well dear reader, I'm semi-sad to report that the reality of Minecraft's Mega Man X DLC does not live up to that potential. There are a few moments of magic here, mostly derived from the absurdity of seeing classic Mega Man X moments lovingly recrafted in Minecraft's trademark cubic style. But in some ways, these high points only work to highlight how much better this package could have been. It's riddled with technical problems, unexpected deviations from both of its sources' formulas and an overall sense of smallness that's unfitting to either of its lineages.

The DLC starts with a quick tutorial on how to aim and shoot, tasking the player to blast a giant Mega Man X cartridge in order to insert it into an equally oversized SNES. It's both a way to teach the player how to adapt to the new rules of the game, while also working as a declaration of intent. The developers at 57Digital wanted to remake the SNES game inside of Minecraft – and if this were a free fan mod, their efforts would have been much more well received. They managed to engineer fantastic versions of X's chargeable blaster, his ability to kick-jump up walls and all eight of the boss weapons he acquires in his original game, which he now . . . purchases from a store? That's just the start of the jarring differences. X now has a double jump, and his dash is a weird, mostly useless crouch-slide. You also can't play with a side-view camera, and most egregiously of all, there are only four boss stages instead of eight, making this DLC smaller than the original SNES game. The arbitrary inconsistencies are everywhere, and they all work to chip away at the authenticity of the finished product.

Worst of all, it's impossible to freely explore or build. Technical issues like music that doesn't loop properly and the occasional game-breaking bug could be forgiven if you could activate Creative Mode and make your own levels. But not only are all building materials blocked from use, straying too far from any level's linear path will put you "out of bounds" and automatically kill you. It's frustrating.

The developers at 57Digital did *some* admirable work here, but were ultimately out of their depth – their Minecraft DLC projects before this consisted entirely of dozens of "skin" packs that simply cosmetically altered the looks of characters in the game. So while it was interesting to do a run through their blocky, FPS-styled recreation of one of my favorite games, I was left feeling powered down in the end, and won't likely want to X-perience it again.

– JONATHAN

6.5

DLC PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: 57DIGITAL RATING: E10+

9.0

The Beheaded Becomes a Belmont

DEAD CELLS: RETURN TO CASTLEVANIA

BEFORE WE CAN pay the ol' Count another violent house call, I must address the disservice I did toward developer Motion Twin in my original Dead Cells review back in Issue #36. I was deeply resenting my time with the game and wound up berating a roguelite for . . . well . . . being a roguelite. I gradually waded back into those genre waters with a more open mind in subsequent years – thus, when I returned to Dead Cells in time, I was able to discover joy where I once thought there was none.

I'm glad I could, because the new Return to Castlevania expansion does little to change the core experience – and I can now wholeheartedly state that that's not a bad thing!

As with previous Dead Cells DLC, the new content is woven into the main campaign as yet another branching route to explore. You're still playing as The Beheaded – an amorphous, corpse-possessing prisoner trying to escape a disease-infested island while hoarding as much loot as you can – but now your greedy pursuit happens to overlap with one Richter Belmont's quest to vanquish Dracula. You basically wander into Symphony of the Night and take over the story! That may sound like a lazy premise, but it's the perfect fit for Dead Cells' brand of tongue-in-cheek humor.

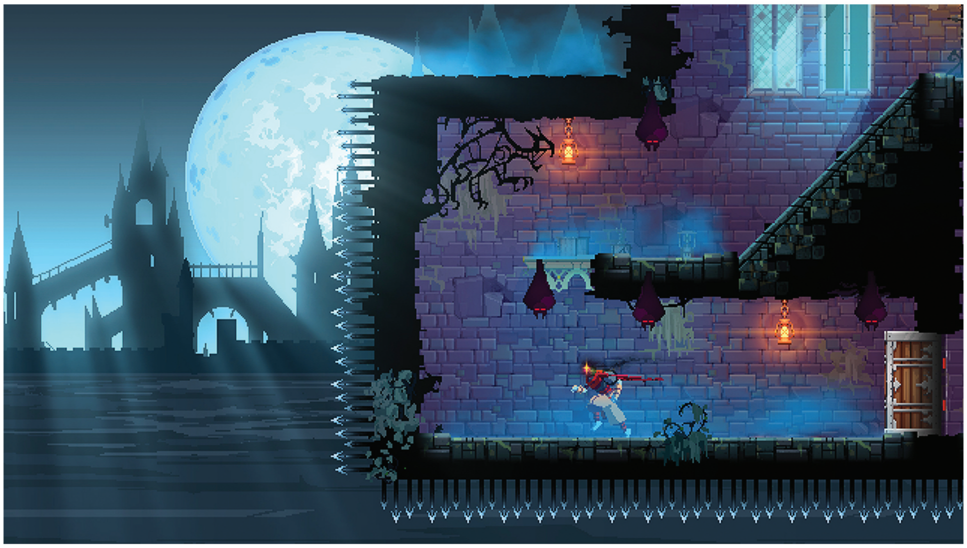
It's apparent why the integration is so seamless. Motion Twin has made it no secret that Castlevania was their primary inspiration for the game's exquisite combat and labyrinthine levels. Return to Castlevania simply allowed the team to cast aside all pretense and fully embrace the "curse of darkness," giving 'Vania series baddies a Dead Cells makeover and cranking out excellent arrangements of several legendary jams.

From the decor adorning Drac's Castle to the abundance of series-appropriate outfits and weapons you can unlock, the attention to detail is unparalleled. There are some humorous cameos by Maria Renard, who quips that Richter is kinda useless without her around, and Alucard, who refuses to fight Drac himself because of his crippling daddy issues. Even the thigh-high-boot-wearing nun Shanoa from Order of Ecclesia appears as a stand-in for the upgrade-supplying Collector between levels!

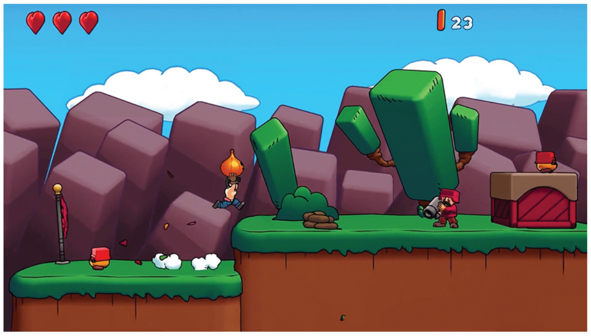
I do wish there was a wider variety of bosses to tangle with – Death and Dracula were always a given, but I would've loved a tag team battle against Slogra and Gaibon as well!

Speaking of Drac, his showdown is probably the greatest moment not just in this DLC, but in Dead Cells as a whole. Every element is so expertly crafted, from the pre-fight banter that changes depending on your choice of clothing, to his rather uncharacteristic attack of trying to literally curb stomp your face! And when he eventually morphs into his second form and "Simon Belmont's Theme" kicks in? Mwah! Chef's kiss!

Return to Castlevania is as much a loving tribute to Konami's influential franchise as it is a reaffirmation of Dead Cells' addictive qualities. I may not have been able to appreciate that in the past, but hey, it's never too late for second chances! **– TONY**



DLC PUBLISHER: MOTION TWIN DEVELOPERS: MOTION TWIN & EVIL EMPIRE RATING: T



Toss Some Vegetables!
ONION ASSAULT

HAVE YOU EVER wondered why Mario has never returned to Subcon to toss more turnips and enemies, or why any other game of that era failed to emulate that style of gameplay? Hörberg Productions of Gunman Clive fame wondered as well, and they've answered the question with Onion Assault. Taking place in Onionia, the evil Croquetto Empire has vowed to conquer the land and reign supreme. Onion farmers Pelle Lok and Mama Lok, when confronted with soldiers from the regime, fight back with what they know best: onions!

There's no difference in gameplay between the two playable characters, unfortunately, and while the gameplay mimics Super Mario Bros. 2 (USA), it doesn't mirror it. The jumping feels too heavy and the slipperiness is dialed up to 11. With how precise players must be to land on the heads of soldiers with tiny helmets (and hitboxes), this proves a challenge, especially if they're used to the SMB2 mechanics.

It's generally tougher than SMB2, but with a little practice, things feel more manageable shortly. When later levels demand landing with pinpoint accuracy, things can get frustrating, but the game's consequences for failing are low. There are checkpoints in each level, and new lives come with every 50 coins. Coins are retained between deaths, and if the Loks run out of lives, they simply get booted to the map to start the level over with four fresh tries.

I would have liked to see more imaginative gameplay in the final levels, more akin to Wart's Palace in World 7 of SMB2. I also wanted more digging in the sand, but throwing snow around to build a hill to jump from was brilliant.

The art style is fun and colorful and the animation is fluid and great. There were times when I confused foreground and background, though, as there's little to distinguish the two. The locales aren't just the normal platforming fare of grasslands, deserts and snow lands, as Pelle and Mama will visit a candyland, a swaying forest and a village with mushrooms and pumpkins as well.

Solving the puzzles of how to defeat some enemies is rewarding, and some other memorable moments that I won't spoil await players willing to take the leap. I am willing to spoil that collecting the three Onion Coins in each level, while fun and challenging, yields no reward. This was a real letdown, as even some ending quirk or unlockable feature would have been better than nothing.

The soundtrack isn't very memorable, and it's a short game that only lasts a handful of hours with very little replayability, but at $8 it's a worthwhile romp for fans of Mario's unique NES adventure. **— BRETT**

8.0

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: HÖRBERG PRODUCTIONS RATING: E10+

Boss Rush: The Game!
MECHSTERMINATION FORCE

I'VE PLAYED A lot of boss fights over my nearly 35+ years of gaming, so it takes a lot to impress me – and Mechstermination Force absolutely impressed me. From the visuals to the gameplay to the challenge of a game built solely around a big boss rush, it's a travesty I didn't find it sooner!

Imagine Shadow of the Colossus and Contra had a baby. You're a dinky human with measly little guns going up against monstrous mechs built to level cities with ease. You're hopelessly outmatched, and in the opening level of the game you see most of your platoon wiped out at the hands – or cannons – of the first boss. Taking it down on your own is therefore rewarding, but there's no rest for the weary as your superior officer just throws you back into the fray to face the next menace.

Collecting the coins the bosses leave behind allows for incremental upgrades like flamethrowers and lasers, while new movement abilities like a double jump and climbing unlock as you play. Each addition will help you with the next fight, but later battles allow for trial and error to find the best way to break up the baddies. Loot can unfortunately be sparse or even impossible to reach, and items are expensive.

Any expectation I had because I noticed an inspiration from another game was immediately built upon and left me in awe. Some robots are so big they become platforming levels! Others you have to scale, while they themselves are scaling a building! Many of them have you thinking they're beaten, only to then transform into something else completely wild and even more dangerous. Even the dialogue and enemy names are funny and unique. GunMech 5 is a cowboy mech? I see what you did there, Hörberg Productions!

Later levels can get extremely difficult. I actually found Mission 12's "Mechtastrophy S5" – a skull mech covered in snakes – to be maddening. Still, perseverance is rewarded, and the consequence of failing just means you head back to HQ to try again.

A second player can join you at any time, and it's an absolute blast to play couch co-op with someone. It made the game infinitely better playing with my son, as we were both amazed at each battle and transformation. We were laughing throughout the "TriMechalon 2000" battle, because it was a three-part mech consisting of a humanoid figure, a bird and a crab that merged hilariously in the end.

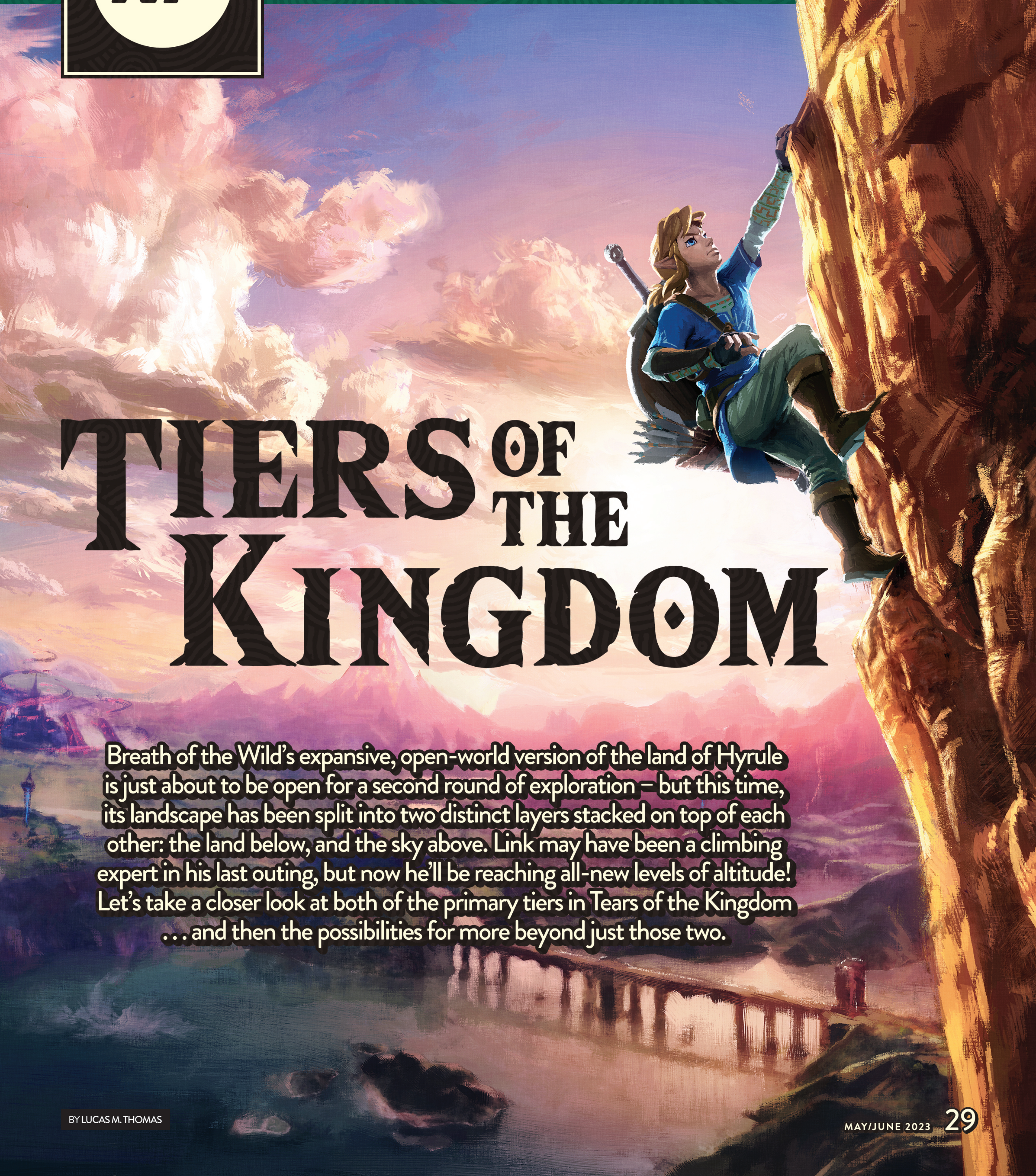
While there are only 14 missions, the ability to replay each for better times and loot adds value.

The visuals are amazing, the brilliant design of each battle is a sight to behold and the gameplay is rewarding. This game is absolutely worth the $12 entry fee! (But it's often on sale for much cheaper!) **— BRETT**

9.0

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: HÖRBERG PRODUCTIONS RATING: E10+

BY LINDSEY LAYNE KING



TIERS OF THE KINGDOM

Breath of the Wild's expansive, open-world version of the land of Hyrule is just about to be open for a second round of exploration – but this time, its landscape has been split into two distinct layers stacked on top of each other: the land below, and the sky above. Link may have been a climbing expert in his last outing, but now he'll be reaching all-new levels of altitude! Let's take a closer look at both of the primary tiers in Tears of the Kingdom . . . and then the possibilities for more beyond just those two.

BY LUCAS M. THOMAS

The Sky

I HOPE YOU'RE not afraid of heights, because The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom is about to send you soaring up into the sky once again!

Spending time up amongst the clouds is not entirely new for the Zelda series, as the adventure of Skyward Sword in particular dedicated plenty of its attention to spaces that were suspended in mid-air. And yet, Skyward Sword really only had a handful of floating land masses to visit: the central hub city of Skyloft, and then a smattering of other tiny islands, each of which only held one point of interest or a single minigame to play.

Well, Skyward Sword's about to be blown out of the sky, as Tears of the Kingdom boasts a massive array of dozens of unique sky islands to explore! From flying forests to gravity-defying globes, entire temple structures and even what look to be mazes lifted up from the ground below, Link will be able to spend countless hours seeing all the new sights hovering over Hyrule – it's sure to be a whole game's worth of freshly made areas to examine, without even taking into account the returning lands below!

So . . . what exactly are these sky islands, and why weren't they visible before?

Nintendo's been vague with the details in advance of the game's launch – they've been especially secretive about nearly every aspect of this sequel for most of the last four years – but we have had a few clues. For example, we know that the evil, magical force of Malice, which is connected to Ganondorf, causes Hyrule Castle to break free from its foundations and begin to float at the beginning of this new adventure.

So does that mean Ganon's malevolent magic has caused all these structures to lift up off of the surface and travel upward into the air? Well, I don't think so! It looks more like we're going to get a mixture – some of the skybound spaces to explore seem to be raised up from beneath, like Hyrule Castle, but most of them are entirely new land masses . . . which means they must have drifted down from higher altitudes.

Going back to Skyward Sword again, that game established that a nearly impenetrable cloud barrier separated the upper skies where Skyloft was located from the ground level far below – the Link of that era had to open up specific gateways through that barrier to be able to dive down and reach the surface. Similarly, in Breath of the Wild, the roaming dragons Dinraal, Farosh and Naydra would cruise around in the air for a few minutes each time they appeared, but would then always disappear by venturing further upward into the atmosphere – and opening a temporary doorway through the cloud barrier when they did so. Could that have been a hint that there's always been more to see high above Breath of the Wild's Hyrule, and we're only now getting the chance to find out exactly what's been up there all along?

Investigating the origins of the sky islands' appearance should begin from the very first moments of taking control of Link in Tears of the Kingdom, as Nintendo has confirmed that we'll actually be starting off this adventure on one of them! Nintendo's official website for the game states that "Link begins his journey on one of the many mysterious floating islands that have suddenly appeared in the skies high above Hyrule. It's there our hero will have to gain new abilities before returning to the surface world to begin his epic adventure." It makes perfect sense to me: Breath of the Wild began with the relatively contained space of the Great Plateau being available to explore, and serving as a tutorial for the grander game beyond. A self-contained sky island starting zone can serve the same purpose in Tears of the Kingdom, giving us a place to earn Link's new abilities like Fuse and Ascend. Then that moment when Link got the Paraglider and could safely jump off the edge of the Plateau for the first time in Breath of the Wild? That will probably be echoed by our hero learning how to safely skydive back down to surface level for the first time!

Beyond that point . . . the sky's the limit. (Probably literally!) The dynamic of Tears of the Kingdom seems like it'll be all about traveling back and forth between the sky islands and the surface, ping-ponging up and down to visit points of interest at both altitudes.

Link will have all kinds of different ways to travel between the two planes, too. All four of his new gameplay mechanics can be used in ways that help him gain vertical height – we'll go over those further in the Previews section ahead – and when he wants to descend, he'll be able to paraglide his way down, catch a ride on a bird-shaped stone glider (at some point in the quest, at least), or just drop like a rock and let the force of gravity take control.

Personally, I think I'll try to spend as much time in the sky as possible, though! The sky islands look so intriguingly mysterious, accented as they are by weird yellow-leaved trees and odd man-made structures we never saw on the surface before.

Or maybe they're robot-made? Nintendo has been kind enough to show us the native occupants of the sky islands: the Constructs – a race of robots seemingly built by the ancient, mysterious Zonai people, who are themselves a tribe only vaguely hinted at in Breath of the Wild. But they seem to be stepping fully into the spotlight in this sequel!

It may be that the Zonai people didn't die off as their civilization's ruins on the ground have suggested since Breath of the Wild was released. Maybe they simply decided to relocate their homes up into the air, and it's Zonai magic (or technology?) that keeps the sky islands aloft. Or maybe they *did* all die off, and the Constructs, their loyal robo-creations, are all that remain of their once-thriving society?

I just don't know! And I love that I don't know, because it means this all-new zone of exploration in Tears of the Kingdom truly will be worth investigating in full. I want to see all the sights of the sky islands, meet all the characters (robot or not) who reside there, and then dive straight off each and every one of those hovering chunks of dirt to find out where I'll land down below!

The Surface

WHAT HAPPENS AFTER the credits roll?

When a player finishes a video game – by saving the world, rescuing a kidnapped character, beating the final boss or some combination of those classic game-ending events – that's usually it. The curtain falls. The screen fades to black and we don't get to explore that game world any more.

But . . . what if we did? What if the story actually continued, and we got to really experience the aftermath of a grand victory against the forces of evil?

The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom is offering us exactly this kind of rare privilege. The credits did roll after Calamity Ganon's defeat at the end of Breath of the Wild – but here we are again, back in that same Hyrule, picking up where that story left off six years ago.

Some time has passed. Probably not six years' worth as in the real world, but at least a year or two of relative peace and calm got a chance to settle over the kingdom between adventures. So, separate from the exploration of the sky islands that Link will undertake overhead, he'll also get to revisit the familiar regions on Hyrule's surface and see what's the same as before, and what's changed in the time that's transpired since he struck BOTW's final blow.

From what we've seen so far, it appears that the people of Hyrule have been busy with rebuilding. Hyrule Castle Town – the community that was entirely destroyed by rampaging Guardians during the events of the Great Calamity 100 years before Breath of the Wild – is finally being reconstructed. New settlements are being founded all across Hyrule, and gathering places like the iconic stables dotted across the map are in the middle of an expansion. Even totally well-established communities like Hateno Village will look different than they did before. There appears to be a brand-new mushroom theme to that small city? Have the people there all suddenly become huge fans of Mario's Mushroom Kingdom?

In classic Nintendo style, the surface world being under construction on a grand scale kills two Keese with the same stone:

It serves the narrative purpose of showing a kingdom in recovery mode after finally banishing the curse of Calamity Ganon, but it also serves the gameplay. Since one of the core new gameplay mechanics in Tears of the Kingdom is about building your own vehicles and other kooky contraptions, it's perfect that random piles of building materials are simply scattered everywhere you look around Hyrule!

"Working on building a new log cabin for your family there, Bob? Well, sorry for the inconvenience — I just need to borrow a few of your roofing tiles here, and maybe that load-bearing central pillar in the middle of your living room. I'll bring them right back, honest! I just have to put together a flying boat and sail up to that sky island for a few days. No worries!"

Hey, Link's entered private homes and shamelessly smashed people's pottery for years with no remorse. You think he's not going to steal away Little Timmy's bedroom wall if he needs an extra floorboard for his custom-built SUV?

Thankfully, the good, giving people of all the regions of Hyrule seem like they're in full support of Link's quest this time around — as more glimpses Nintendo has given us at different interactions on the surface offer further clues about what gameplay will be like in the overworld this time. Beyond just revisiting old Breath of the Wild locations and seeing what's different about them, we'll also be tasked to come together with the commoners of all corners of the kingdom and defend their homes against Ganondorf's all-new onslaught of evil!

Take a look at the screenshot up above. Link is charging into battle at Fort Hateno, the same place he famously fell in a critical battle 100 years before Breath of the Wild. It's under assault again — but Link is not alone in defending it! NPC villagers are in the scene too, doing what they can to push back the menacing Malice-fueled monsters. And it's not a cutscene, either! It's a real-time event! That's definitely new.

And take a look at the other screenshot below. Here, Link seems to have assembled a ragtag fighting force representing several different races — a Goron and a Gerudo are squaring up to fight some off-camera foes right alongside a handful of Hylians. (One of whom is adorably wearing a bucket as a makeshift helmet.)

My guess is that both of these images are examples of battle events that will be available to take part in at random times. Like a sudden swarm of wild Pokémon popping up somewhere in the game world and you getting an alert about it, I'd wager that "let's all fight these monsters!" group NPC battles will pop up as optional activities as you explore the surface. (And I'm guessing they're optional because to make them mandatory would go against the full feeling of freedom both Breath of the Wild and Tears of the Kingdom are built on.) Though I suppose they could be one-time story missions too, that, once cleared, wouldn't happen in the same place again. We'll see!

What about the commonfolk who aren't exactly fighting fit, though? Well, we'll also get to interact uniquely with them — yet another small glimpse Nintendo has given us in advance of the game's release shows Link pulling a custom-built carriage behind his horse, and it's loaded up with a bunch of NPC passengers! So not only will we get to fight alongside the average Joes in battles, but we'll also have escort missions, quests to relocate civilians to safe areas and surely much, much more. The people of Hyrule aren't going to be so one-note any more, just standing in one place and repeating the same bit of dialogue over and over again. They're going to be dynamic! They're going to be on the move, and taking their fates into their own hands!

Rallying the population and working to secure the surface against this latest incursion of evil should feel satisfying. Maybe we'll actually get to bring permanent positive change to some pieces of the kingdom on the surface — giving us a bit of the feeling of getting to enjoy the fruits of our labor after completing heroic deeds, like we normally don't get after video game credits roll and the screen fades to black!

Underground

THE VERY FIRST Legend of Zelda had all of its dungeons underground. Sure, lots of them had elaborate entrances on the surface – but as Link stepped inside, he always descended a staircase. Walking downward. Entering the earth.

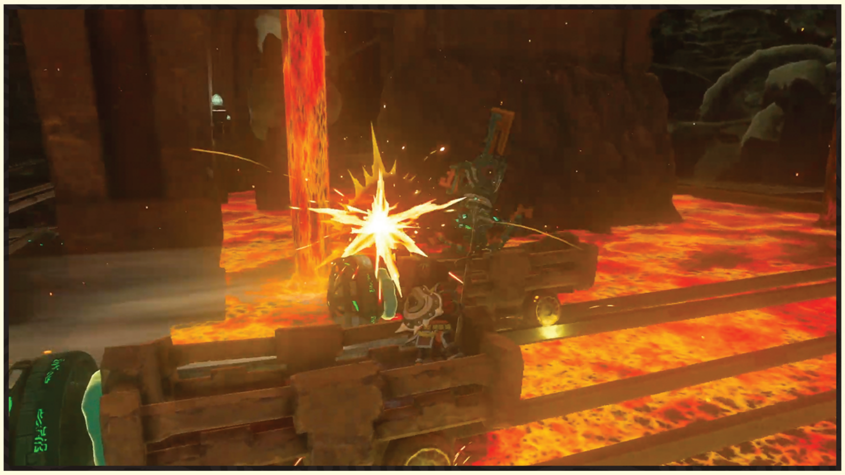
The same held true for Zelda II! Link would enter every palace at ground level, but he'd always be instantly met by an elevator. To get into the dungeon proper, he had to go down.

Tears of the Kingdom is clearly greatly concerned with the sky islands newly hovering over Hyrule, and, to a lesser extent, the events taking place on the land below. But what about *below* below? What's going on deeper down, underneath the surface? What's happening down in the underground?

The very first trailer we got of this game – four years ago at E3 2019 – took place entirely under the earth. Link and Zelda were on a subterranean expedition together, seemingly investigating a large network of catacombs running underneath Hyrule Castle. After that first look, though, attention shifted away from those darkened tunnels, leaving us to wonder what role, if any, such settings will play in the final game.

I'm still betting that underground areas will play a major role! Though we haven't seen much, we have recently had glimpses of areas clearly located under Hyrule's soil – *large* areas, like a massive lava-filled cavern that must be underneath the Goron stomping grounds of Death Mountain. And then a second, not-so-boiling-hot underground zone can be seen in the shot above – is that an entire subterranean forest?

Hyrule's surface has also been marred by dozens of gaping sinkholes that are oozing with Malice. Approaching them from the side might be impossible . . . but what if we can skydive straight through them from the sky islands above? That could be Nintendo's way of linking together not just two tiers of this newly revised kingdom of Hyrule, but three! I'm excited – I can't what to find out what lies beneath!



The Sea?

DID YOU NOTICE the altimeter?

The circular minimap in the bottom-right corner of Tears of the Kingdom's HUD has had an upgrade from Breath of the Wild's. Now, it's got three numbers that are each constantly updating themselves as Link makes his way around the kingdom: one for his north/south position, another as his east/west coordinate and a third that mostly sticks close to zero – so long as you stay down on the ground. The instant Link begins to gain elevation, though, it starts to skyrocket! It's a measure of his altitude – his vertical position, relative to sea level.

This new feature should be useful for remembering where specific points of interest are, and sharing that information with friends. "Hey everybody! There's a new Korok Seed hidden at 1337 by 2513!" But those moments will mostly focus on the X and Y coordinates – I'm most intrigued by the Z-axis!

Specifically, I'm wondering just how high we'll actually get to climb. In the 10-minute gameplay demonstration video Mr. Aonuma shared at the end of March, he sent Link up to the sky islands using the Recall ability (more on that later), but when he stopped, his altitude still only measured as 0568.

That's crazy! You're telling me that the sky islands can already be reached by going up to less than 600 units on the altimeter, but its maximum reading has four digits – so we could conceivably go up to 9999? Where would that take us? *The moon?*

It seems like a totally out-of-this-world idea, but what if we actually did venture up into outer space? I'm reprinting the "Link in a spacesuit" concept art I first shared 10 issues ago, because it would just be so wild to actually see Nintendo go that bonkers with the Zelda brand. And it could be technically possible! A YouTuber, ThornyFox, posted a video last year demonstrating how space can actually be reached in Breath of the Wild using the height-gaining after-effects of blasting yourself with about a zillion bomb arrows. It has to be something the dev team has at least considered!

For a less spacey bit of speculation, how about enhanced sea exploration? That same altimeter, when reading 0000, should line up with the ocean surrounding Hyrule. Could we potentially be able to visit more of it, beyond where the invisible walls at the edge of Breath of the Wild's map stopped our travels six years ago? Tears of the Kingdom is allowing us to build our own custom boats, after all – it would be a shame to not have much explorable water area to be able to use them in.

Or how about *under* the water? Breath of the Wild's swimming kept Link up on the surface of every lake, river and pond he leapt into – diving was just not a thing. But diving has been a big thing in past Zeldas! This series has even let us transform into gill-equipped fishfolk in the past! Letting Link finally hold his breath and dive down to see what's under the sea could be yet another "tier" for Tears.

Now, OK, I'll wrap this feature up. Since I know some of you out there are wondering why I'm even still speculating about the game at this point. It's almost out! All the question marks are about to be erased, because we'll know exactly what is and isn't included in the adventure incredibly soon, when we sit down to actually play the final game! . . . Ah, but you see, that's precisely why. I love the speculation phase of being a video game fan. I love the feeling of not knowing – of looking forward to the launch of a great new game, but still being unsure of exactly what it will contain. We have had six years now where the sequel to Breath of the Wild has had nothing but potential – so before that all coalesces into final reality, I wanted one last round of "What if?"! NF

Outer Space!?

SPOILER WARNING!
SEE THE MOVIE BEFORE READING!

THE SUPER MARIO BROS. MOVIE

Mario's finally back on the big screen. Let's talk about it!

MATTHEW T.: It's wild to think that 30 years have passed since we first saw the inscrutable live-action Super Mario Bros. movie. While that film certainly took its liberties with the source material, I'd say one of the biggest strengths of Illumination's The Super Mario Bros. Movie is how it fully embraces the Mario world. Hollywood adaptations of video games largely get gun-shy when it comes to keeping things faithful, and I'd say this applies even as recently as the two Sonic movies, which pluck our heroes out of their usual environments and mostly constrain them to the "real" world.

Mario's new movie, on the other hand, feels like a celebration of 40 years of gaming history. You've got floating platforms, all manner of classic baddies (Illumination knows their minions, after all) and even a very faithful approach to power-ups and how they work! While I have my issues with the film (which we'll get to shortly), I couldn't help but smile throughout, watching this world come to life in a brand-new format. It's almost like peeking into a future Mario game!

TONY: My theater was packed near capacity. The showtime before the one I attended was sold out even. This hasn't happened at this location in I don't know how many years – and I'm glad to be able to say the hype was deserved!

Like Matthew, I'm delighted that Illumination went all-in on the video game attributes, whereas other adaptations try to ground the action in some semblance of realism. Yet as much as I loved the gaming references – shout-out to Pauline as mayor of NYC! – I'm shocked by how invested I was in Mario and Luigi's home dynamic. Early on, the brothers join their parents for a traditional Italian meal, alongside various aunts, uncles and cousins. Far from ruining any preconceived thoughts concerning their personal lives, it just solidified their everyman status. Yep, just a couple of ambitious Italian boys from Brooklyn, trying their hardest to prove their worth to their family.

Also, Charles Martinet as their disapproving father was the perfect casting decision!

KRIS: My family and I went on opening day, right after the kids got out of school, and it was a magical experience from top to bottom. There were a lot of things I loved about the movie, but I was the most surprised by how much I appreciated its pacing. There are plenty of animated kids' movies today that are genuine masterpieces, but a lot of them tend to be on the long side, and no matter how good they are, when things get too "talky," kids start to get bored. That never happened during my showing. It was a brisk hour and a half that never lingered on anything that wasn't funny or flashy for too long. A lot of critics have been panning the movie for this, but as a parent I appreciated it immensely.

Also, Kid Icarus was in it!!!

BRETT: I just got back from seeing it with my whole family – our first full-family movie – and it was a massive hit for everyone. I had seen it on my own to "screen" it for content on opening night, in IMAX. I had a great time and loved all of the references, Easter eggs and the general mayhem of the movie, but seeing it through all of my kids' eyes at their various stages, from 2 to 14, was one of the best geeky family moments we've shared. All of them wanted to tell me what they had seen in the movie and share the Mario love with me.

When critics try to critique a "kids" movie it rarely goes well, but this IP especially means so much to so many generations that they had a truly heavy burden to bear – and I think Illumination handled it brilliantly. I agree wholeheartedly with Kris that the runtime was perfect for the audience, and not feeling obligated to do something plot-wise that didn't jive with the games while simultaneously hinting at Peach's backstory and expanding on the Bros.' home life felt brilliant. It didn't need to get complicated.

I also went with a friend's family that had a kid who had never played a Mario game, and she loved it too! So it was great to get a non-nostalgic viewpoint – someone can enjoy it for different reasons other than recognizing music from Super Mario Odyssey or Galaxy or 64 or seeing a Yoshi Coin from Super Mario World or an Arwing or a Pikmin or . . . well, of course, I could go on for days. The point is, the things critics have been dinging it on should take a back seat and the movie should be recognized for its impeccable appeal to all audiences. It's truly a feat.

DAVID: As I sat there, watching the movie, one of my biggest worries came to pass: I felt like I'd seen most of the movie before I even walked in the door. That isn't to say there were no surprises – the beginning and end in particular, and there were a few moments to stitch things together, but at the same time . . .

Unfortunately, part of that realization also cemented an unfortunate fact: Luigi's involvement is largely shoved aside in favor of Princess Peach's role, enough that one can question whether the Super Mario *Bros.* title is even fully justified. Which is kind of ironic, as I grew a distaste for Luigi being sidelined and the titles excluding him (whether he was in a game or not) as far back as Super Mario 64.

I suppose it is ironic – or perhaps even deliberate – then, that Luigi's biggest parts come in the stuff that wasn't shown in the trailers and ads and such.

That said, I do want to make it very clear that I *love* what they did with Peach here. They exceeded my expectations and wildest imagination of what they might do with her, and while not a total departure for the character, it's different enough from what Nintendo has given us the last several years that I do hope that Peach fans enjoy this version of the character as much as I did.

I also loved Charlie Day's Luigi. I just wish he got to do more. Jack Black's Bowser was great (though on occasion, I thought it sounded like he slipped from "Jack Black playing Bowser" to just "Jack Black"). Chris Pratt was a fine Mario; perhaps not as iconic as Martinet, but I feel like he fits in well with a lineage that also consists of the legendary Peter Cullen, Captain Lou Albano, Walker Boone and Bob Hoskins.

TONY: I too really loved the tough-as-nails version of Peach in this movie. It reminded me so much of her incarnation from the Super Mario Adventures comic in Nintendo Power. Ironically, she's *so* good at kicking butt that she kinda makes Mario redundant. There's even that scene shortly before she and Mario depart the Mushroom Kingdom, in which she assures her confused subjects that this odd newcomer is of "no importance whatsoever!" The truth is that she is plenty capable of saving the day on her own, but a certain someone's name in the title meant she's forced to concede the limelight.

Which brings me to what I felt is the weirdest sort-of-a plot hole in the film: Mario's athleticism. An early sequence during which Mario and Luigi race through Brooklyn to get to a job on time demonstrates how much of a parkour master Mario is even before their magical adventure. Yeah, he's hopping across narrow scaffolding and scaling buildings like Spider-Man – then he undergoes Peach's training course and suddenly has two left feet? I get that it's a new environment with weird laws of physics, but you'd think his real-world skills would translate to faster adaptation. (Meanwhile, Peach just sits there all day and night until he finishes, when she can already run the course basically blindfolded? What exactly did she see in this man!?)

MATTHEW T.: Regarding Peach, I thought they adjusted her so much that she came across as a near-completely different character. It's good to see how they played homage to her adventuring in the past (complete with floating!), but she was practically invincible throughout the movie. And from a narrative standpoint, I agree with Tony in that her combat skills overshadowed Mario to the point where the plumber just felt like another ally rather than the hero of the story. I also would've liked to see more of her trademark kindness; she's pretty insulting to our boy during their first meetup, while game Peach has always had a sort of pleasant and regal poise to her.

I'm glad she didn't spend the entire film locked in a cage, of course, but there's gotta be a better middle ground between Olive Oyl and flawless warrior.

KRIS: I couldn't agree more with the Luigi situation. I don't know where they could have stuffed it, but some sort of side plot of him breaking himself and the other prisoners out and trying to escape the castle while Mario came to save him, even if he was unsuccessful, would have been perfect. Even just five more minutes would have solved that problem.

Also, my son has been singing the Super Mario Bros. rap from the old cartoon for days now.

TONY: On the topic of singing, how about Bowser's ballad, eh? Casting Jack Black as the lovesick Bowser pretty much guaranteed that we'd get a song out of him, and it was every bit as amazing as I could've hoped for!

The music choices in general were spot-on. I love how much the tunes from throughout the Mario series were woven into the soundtrack – the Super Show theme during the plumbing commercial, "DK Rap" during Donkey Kong's intro, "Attack! Fury Bowser" during the heavy metal Koopa concert – not to mention the orchestrated arrangements of so, so many classic Mario pieces!

But then they had to ruin the vibe with the same ol' handful of radio-friendly licensed songs that have popped up in every non-Disney animated film for the past two decades. If I ever have to hear "Holding Out for a Hero" again, it'll be too soon!

KRIS: I'm glad they at least avoided the trappings of stuffing the film with whatever was popular while it was being made. Nothing dates a movie quite like pop music that's already irrelevant by the time the movie hits theaters, and that's one Bullet Bill I couldn't be happier they successfully dodged. They did it with more than just music, too. Luigi didn't dab. Mario didn't floss. Nobody was doing Fortnite dances or slinging the latest young-person lingo. They aimed to make the movie more timeless, and I can't overstate how much I appreciate that.

MATTHEW T.: How'd everyone like the voice cast? For me, four performances really stood out: Pratt's Mario managed to strike a middle ground between Captain Lou and Charles Martinet that left me very satisfied, and Day's nervous exclamations gave a manic energy to Luigi. Richardson's Kamek channeled a Peter Lorre voice that's going to be my headcanon for the character from now on. And of course, Black's Bowser hit a great ratio between menacing and goofy. Although to nitpick, it sure was strange hearing him outright say he was going to "kill" Luigi.

TONY: Pratt's performance was a lot better than I think anyone assumed going off a few sound bites 'round the net. It wasn't some Earth-shattering tour de force, but as you said, Matthew, it was pleasant and subdued. I did find it really funny how the movie lampshaded the brothers' exaggerated Italian accents from the games – Mario and Luigi imitated Martinet's cadence in their commercial just to play up their heritage, then they asked Jumpman lookalike Giuseppe (voiced by Martinet himself) if the accents were too thick, and he gave them a big thumbs up!

BRETT: I found all the voices to be well done. I'd say that Fred Armisen's Cranky was probably the weakest of the bunch. It was fun to see Chunky and have Diddy called out, but no Lanky or Tiny?! I swore I saw Kiddy though. Even on the IMAX screen it was tough to find all of the little nods!

DAVID: I don't know where else to mention this, but can I also say that I'm over the moon at Foreman Spike's inclusion? I've always loved the Black Box era of NES games (to no one's surprise), and to see Mario and Luigi's original rival plucked from obscurity to be in the movie as a part of their backstory? That just filled my heart with joy. (Spike for Mario Kart when?)

KRIS: OK, final thoughts. When this project was announced, all I wanted was for it to not be bad. I'm so happy I got my wish, and the fact that not only would I consider it a solid "good," but also got to have a downright magical moviegoing experience with my family is just gravy. I can't wait to see what Nintendo does with movies next.

TONY: For all the movie's flaws, I 110% enjoyed it (even despite the caffeine-addled children racing up and down the aisle throughout the show). I can't remember the last time I sat through a film without once breaking my smile!

BRETT: I like the Despicable Me movies, but Minions was too much for me, so I was guardedly optimistic about this one. But once they dropped the Super Mario Bros. Super Show rap as the plumbers' commercial during the Super Bowl, I knew the source material at least was being handled correctly.

DAVID: I think this movie helped rekindle in me a fading fondness for Mario. Only time will tell whether Nintendo can (or will) build on this with their games, but as long as we keep getting Mario movies like this, I think I'll be satisfied. Now, if only that Mega Man movie that's been in the works for years now were to fare so well, then we'll really be cookin'!

MATTHEW T.: There are moments that you can tell are made with the utmost love and care, while other aspects are a little half-baked to me. The kid in me was going nuts at seeing Mario's world come to life, while my annoying critical brain kept intruding with thoughts of how I wished certain parts were better. That said, it's ultimately lots of fun, is largely faithful to the games and is honestly still probably the best video game movie adaptation I've seen.

SEE IT YOURSELF!

Originally due to open on April 7, The Super Mario Bros. Movie instead got bumped up to April 5 at the last minute. (And made millions more dollars as a result!) Chances are you've already seen it if you're reading this, but if not you've likely got until June or so before it'll start leaving theaters. At that point it'll begin to be available through home releases, though, so you could enjoy it on your own TV!

BY JOHN-CHARLES HOLMES

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: TEARS OF THE KINGDOM

Link's ascent to an all-new adventure is upon us at last!

HAVING DEDICATED OUR central feature for this edition to the multi-layered environment of Tears of the Kingdom, we can now turn our attention to its multi-talented hero, here in this final pre-release preview.

Link is back! And he's got a whole new bag of tricks.

This is the same Link we first met in Breath of the Wild – but he's not going to have the same skill set. The Sheikah Slate is a thing of the past! It's been replaced as the source of our hero's secondary abilities by his newly corrupted, corroded, somehow magical right arm, which is letting him tap into all-new powers he never had access to before.

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: NINTENDO RELEASE: MAY 12, 2023 RATING: E10+

Four new powers seem to form the backbone of this latest return to Hyrule, replacing the four main Runes from Breath of the Wild. The Remote Bomb, Cryonis, Magnesis and Stasis Runes are no more – they've been swapped out for fresh abilities called Ascend, Recall, Fuse and Ultrahand. Let's introduce those one at a time!

SKYWARD SELF

Let's begin with the simplest and most straightforward of the four: Ascend.

As I already said back in the Tiers feature, this game is going to be all about traveling up and down and back up and back down, over and over again, bouncing between the sky islands and the surface as you make progress in solving the mysteries to be found on both levels of the land. In order to better facilitate that yo-yoing rhythm of exploration, Nintendo's developers have granted Link many new ways to gain elevation in this quest. (In addition to climbing and riding updrafts with his Paraglider.)

So "Ascend" is exactly what you'd guess from its name: a power that lets Link quickly travel directly upwards. If our hero positions himself right underneath a flat surface, he can then magically leap straight up, pass through any solid matter that happens to be

between him and his intended final position, and emerge on the other side.

We first saw this technique used a couple of years ago, when in an earlier trailer Link seemed to transform himself into a teardrop before flying upward, then passed through a slab of solid rock and popped up on the upward-facing side of it. It's been refined a bit since then, as we now get to watch an animation of Link sort of "swimming" through the barriers in his way before coming up for air on the other end, just as if he were resurfacing after diving down into a body of water.

That probably-not-a-coincidence hasn't escaped trailer-examining Zelda superfans, many of whom (myself included) think Ascend could easily pull double duty as a way for Link to quickly return to actual water's surface after really going for a swim. But we'll have to wait to see if that ends up being the case!

For now, Ascend's confirmed uses include zipping up to sky islands from the land below, passing upward through the ceilings of caves to quickly escape back into the outside air and, as Mr. Aonuma heavily hinted, making a jailbreak from inside a cage. If you can pass through any surface above you just like a ghost, after all, you can never be fully contained or restrained!

GOING UP?

Ascend is only one method of upward movement. There are more! In fact, Link's second new ability shares the same kind of utility.

The Recall power is like an amped-up version of the Sheikah Slate's Stasis Rune. In Breath of the Wild, that Rune could be used to freeze objects in time temporarily – you could then apply some force to them, like hammering on a rock, and all that energy would get stored up. Finally, after a few more ticks of its countdown clock, the Stasis would end – and the previously frozen object would fly off in whatever direction you pointed its pent-up energy. (Or else it would just carry on doing what it had been doing before you froze it, if you decided not to apply any new force.)

Recall does the same thing, but only at first, and only for a moment: It stops a moving object in its tracks. But the second effect is new, as a Recalled object will begin to rewind its own timeline, moving backwards in time, retracing whatever trajectory it had been following before Link froze it.

On one hand, that could seem less powerful than Stasis was – since we'll no longer get the option to choose which way these objects will fly after we freeze them. But that process, while versatile, was also slow. Recall can be activated in an instant.

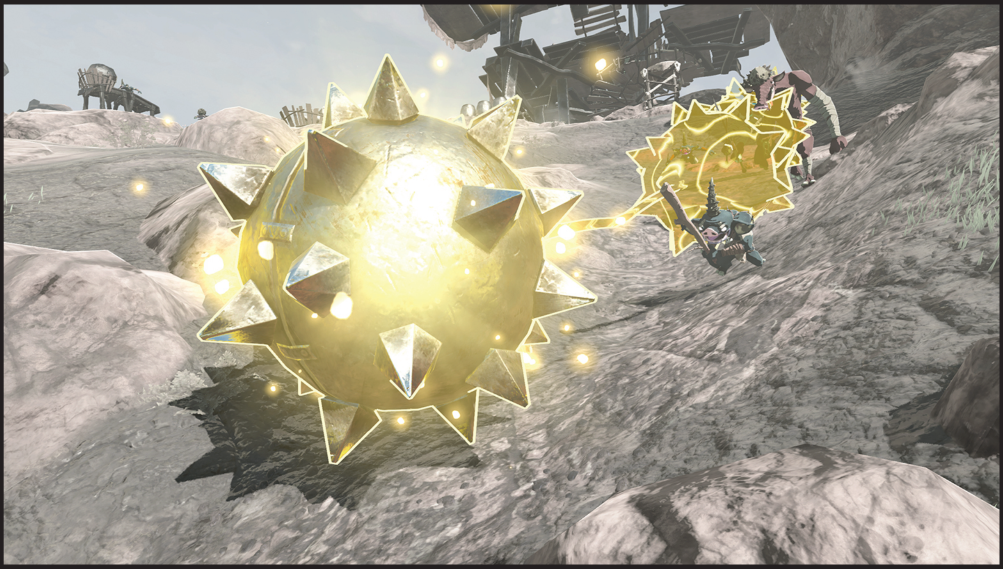
That speed means it can be used effectively in fights! Stasis never had much functionality in the middle of combat, but with Recall you can zap a projectile that's been sent flying your way, and it'll instantly boomerang back the way it came, returning to sender (and probably smacking said sender in the face).

This is another power that we first got a glimpse of at E3 2021, in the short scene I've printed a screen of again just below. A group of enemies is attacking our hero by charging down a hill, and they've rolled a giant spiked metal ball at him! Well, no worries – Link can just use Recall on that mighty orb and turn it into a weapon for himself instead. It pauses, then reverses course, rolling back *up* the hill the way it came, and flattening the bad guys who, two seconds ago, thought they were about to bowl Link over. Not so fast, losers!

But wait! Didn't I say Recall could be used as an alternative to Ascend? Indeed I did.

While on the surface of Hyrule, you'll occasionally see chunks of the sky islands break off and fall to the ground below. If you walk/ride/climb your way to the place where a chunk landed, you can use the Recall ability on it – and it will begin to reverse its own timeline, which in this case means "falling" straight upwards, returning to the sky. It turns itself into a makeshift elevator! Link only needs to hop on top before it begins its return flight, ride it up to higher altitudes, then leap off and paraglide to whichever sky island happens to be nearby. Total convenience!

It's maybe a little odd that Recall and Ascend both have some overlap in what they're good for, but Nintendo likes to offer players different options. Which will you use more often?



WE GOT MR. FUSION, RIGHT?

Let's all take a moment now to thank the Bomb Arrow for its service. It's got its 30th anniversary coming up soon, actually! Link's Awakening, in 1993, was the first Zelda game to feature the two-in-one punch of that explosive-equipped projectile.

By using that game's novel feature of being able to set whichever items you wanted to the two available action buttons, B and A, you could do things like unequip Link's sword and wield two sub-weapons at once instead. Thus, the Bomb Arrow was born – an unofficial item at first, but still fully usable. Players only needed to set the Bombs to one button and the Bow to the other, then press them both at the same time to see their obliterating ordnance streak across the screen.

Why the sudden reverence for this small aspect of a 30-year-old Zelda adventure? Well, because Tears of the Kingdom is taking that old idea of combining two items together to wildly elaborate new lengths.

Link has gone fusion crazy! With the new Fuse ability, our hero can take hold of one item – say, a tree branch – and superglue it to any of dozens of other objects – like a boulder.

The physics don't make a ton of sense, as in that example the boulder shrinks on the spot and Link somehow becomes able to lift it with one hand to use it like a makeshift hammer, with the tree branch it's stuck to serving as the handle. But who cares if it makes sense? It's goofy, and it's fun. And video games are meant to be fun!

The possibilities with Fuse seem so numerous that some of the reason this game got delayed all the way into May 2023 was probably for extended play-testing time. Who knows how many different combinations of things we're getting here! Dozens? Hundreds? *Thousands!?* Somewhere in Kyoto there's a room full of bug hunters who have been trying each and every Fuse combination in every scenario they can imagine, in order to make sure the game doesn't just crash and nope back out to the Switch main menu when a weird one is attempted.

Let's have some more examples, though, to get a better appreciation for the vast array of applications. Link can Fuse a long stick to a farmer's pitchfork to create a ridiculously long polearm – useful for keeping well out of retaliation range in any melee. He can add freezing White Chuchu Jelly to an arrow, making essentially an Ice Arrow in the process. Or he can Fuse a Keese Eyeball to an arrow to make it into a heat-seeking missile that will track its target through the sky!

If he grafts a Puffshroom to his shield, it'll explode into a cloud of spores when struck, shrouding him and letting him sneak up on the suddenly blinded foe. He can glue his shield to his sword if he wants, make the ultimate defense/offense combo weapon!

And those are all just examples we were shown in the game's final two pre-launch videos – there are sure to be zillions more. In fact, as with Recall and Ascend, we now know we got a look at Fuse in action years ago! The scene I'm thinking of is presented in the screenshot below. What looked like Link using some weird new flame-thrower item was actually a Fused combo of two things: He picked up a fire-spewing head of a statue somewhere, and he attached it to his shield. So now any time he lifts his shield up to block incoming attacks with it, it also unleashes a flaming attack of its own!

Figuring out all of the different item combinations available to use through Fuse is going to be such a fun part of the Tears of the Kingdom experience. What will a Meat Arrow do? What happens if I attach a bat wing to a spear? Will there be any practical reason for Fusing together a shield with an apple? Probably not, but then Nintendo is unlikely to stop us from trying even the worst ideas! Players in Breath of the Wild cooked up plenty of "Dubious Food" when playing chef with inadvisable arrays of ingredients, so I'm positive that plenty of dubious Fuse combinations will make the cut for this sequel!

A NOD TO GUNPEI YOKOI

Link's fourth and final (for now) new ability has been happily given the name Ultrahand. If you didn't already know, the name "Ultra Hand" was first used for a Nintendo toy that went on sale all the way back in 1966! It was the first toy made for Nintendo by the legendary Gunpei Yokoi, and it was a great one – it looked like a piece of a lattice fence with handles attached, but when you squeezed the handles together, the lattice stretched out, and the "hand" at the end could grab an object several feet away! It was what my kids would call a "grabber arm."

In the context of Tears of the Kingdom, Link's Ultrahand operates similarly – a glowing tendril of magic extends forward from his right hand, extending his reach considerably and letting him grab hold of objects to move them into different positions. It's basically the Magnesis Rune from Breath of the Wild again, but with the restriction of it only being usable on metallic objects removed.

. . . But that's not all! Magnesis Plus would have probably been interesting on its own, but Ultrahand being able to grasp distant objects is only the smallest extent of its power. The real magic happens when you move the thing you've grabbed over into close proximity with another grabbable item – and then the two things get glued together and become one joint thing!

Yes, Ultrahand is the method by which Link can build all kinds of different things, like custom vehicles, traps for his foes to fall into, bridges to cross and towers to climb and much, much more.

It's kind of a Super Fuse! Just as Recall and Ascend had some overlap in their utility, so too do Ultrahand and Fuse share some DNA – both abilities let you stick things to other things. But while Fuse might be restricted to just two objects getting connected to one another (since Link has to be able to lift the resulting combined creation), Ultrahand has no such restriction. You can slap together a couple of different pieces, or maybe a dozen or more if you have a really elaborate idea for something to build!

In his pre-launch gameplay demonstration, Mr. Aonuma showed off the process for building a simple boat. At first he simply lined up three big logs to serve as the boat's body, and they snapped together, held in place by a few globs of magical glue that appear out of thin air when Ultrahand is being used. He then lifted the raft off the ground and placed it into the water. Finally, he attached a pair of fans to the back of it – to provide propulsion! Link hopped on board, struck the fans with his sword to turn them on, and the boat zipped away, crossing a river and letting our hero reach the other side without having to get his feet wet.

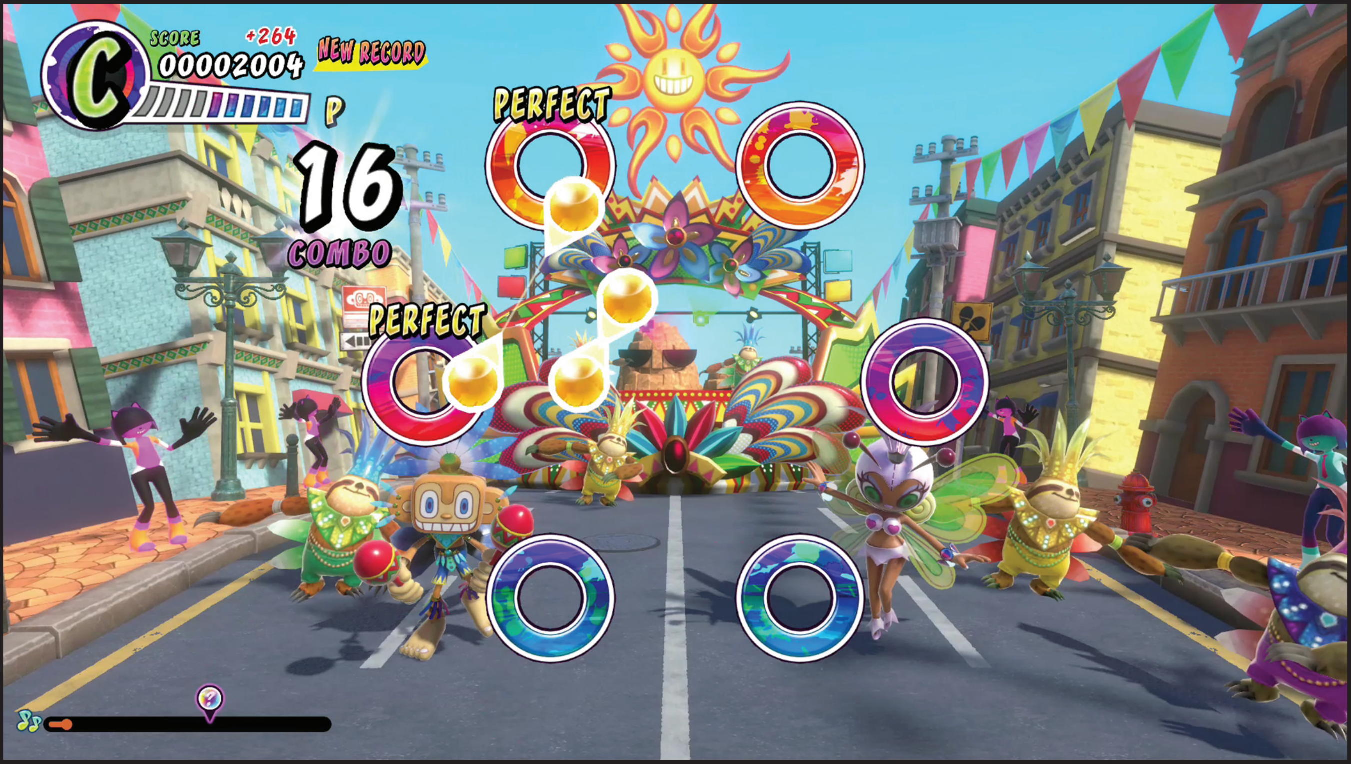
You can build cars by using wheel parts you'll find scattered around the kingdom. Add a sail to any contraption to make it movable with gusts of wind. Assemble a defensive wall out of some large stone slabs, maybe, and roll into battle against a horde of foes who won't be able to touch you as you stow yourself safely inside your custom-built mobile fortress!

THE POSSIBILITIES ARE ENDLESS

To this day, over six years after its release, players of Breath of the Wild are still finding unique ways to play with its physics systems – take a trip to YouTube on any given day and you'll still see new videos with titles like "Did You Know You Could Do THIS in Breath of the Wild?!?!". And it's usually not clickbait, either – there are hundreds if not thousands of unique object interactions in that game alone.

I feel like Nintendo has paid a lot of attention to that kind of content, since it's helped the game maintain strong sales for over half a decade! So they have clearly built this sequel to be packed full of new discoveries, many of which won't be found for several years. The game will appeal to adventurers and explorers at first, as we all head out to see all the new sights among the sky islands, across the surface and beyond. And we'll get to absorb the story and the lore and work toward finding Princess Zelda again and beating Ganondorf once more. But after all that's done – after the credits have rolled – Tears of the Kingdom will still have hundreds of more hours' worth of entertainment to offer, as the tinkerers take over and challenge their imaginations to come up with the most creative contraptions possible. It's going to be amazing!

And that hopeful note is where I'll leave things for now. I hope you've had fun through these last few years, as we diehard Zelda fans have had the rare privilege of getting to enjoy a full (even extra extended) hype cycle for another new sequel in the series, while also not having to fret about our favorite company's fate in the industry. The last time a big new Zelda was in the works and Nintendo was stable both sales- and reputation-wise was, what, Skyward Sword? And even then, the Wii was waning by the time it hit store shelves. Tears gets to ride the wave of six years of Switch success as it arrives. What an ascent! **– LUCAS**



SAMBA DE AMIGO: PARTY CENTRAL

Grab your maracas and get this party started!

BEFORE JUST DANCE, Rock Band, Wii Music and even the Guitar Hero brand, there was a motion-controlled musical monkey who did his darndest to make playing video games with plastic instruments fun. Amigo, the star of the Sega Dreamcast's Samba de Amigo, first made his debut in 1999 in an arcade title of the same name. (Making him older than many popular YouTubers!) Out of all the Sega upstarts from that era, few would have guessed that Samba would be among the few to still be standing nearly a quarter of a decade later. Seaman has since gone extinct, the kids from Jet Set Radio appear permanently grounded, Ryo from Shenmue got docked again and NiGHTS Into Dreams remains in sleep mode, but this furry little fiesta-fueled fella is still shaking after all these years.

This latest entry in the Samba de Amigo series has 40 songs, ranging in style from EDM to gospel. More tunes will arrive post-launch via DLC, which may or may not cost money, but with a franchise this niche, it would make more sense to give the extra songs away, encouraging people to keep playing well after the game's initial release period.

Maybe we'll even get a crossover with Ulala from Space Channel 5 to make this a true Dreamcast love fest? It may seem like a longshot, but after seeing a couple of conga-drumming panthers dressed up like John Belushi and Dan Aykroyd from The Blues Brothers pop up in Party Central's debut trailer, I'm ready for anything.

Songs aside, the big draw of this Switch-bound Samba is a new online mode that allows players to compete in a rump-shaking battle royale against multiple parties. Moving your Joy-Cons to the beat and posing at the right time more precisely than your opponents is the only way to win, with global leaderboards open to all who want to show off their high scores.

With an asking price of just $40 for the base game, the barrier for entry here is far from high. That could lead to a fairly festive and feisty online community at launch, especially if fans of other motion-controlled dance/music games get on board. With Just Dance 2023 set to be the final SKU in that series, fans of the genre may be looking for a new virtual dance partner this summer, and who's better for the job than gaming's original simian of soul? **— JONATHAN**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: SEGA
RELEASE: JUNE 2023 RATING: RP

BATEN KAITOS I & II HD REMASTER

A great pair of GameCube card battlers return!

2023 IS SHAPING up to be the year of GameCube resurgence!

Two of this year's most acclaimed games so far, Resident Evil 4 Remake and Metroid Prime Remastered, originally released on the cubic console. While the newest console remaster of Tales of Symphonia didn't quite hit the same highs, its recent release also highlighted GameCube games making a comeback.

And there's more to come! Baten Kaitos: Eternal Wings and the Lost Ocean and its sequel Baten Kaitos Origins will receive the modern HD re-release treatment together, dubbed Baten Kaitos I & II HD Remaster. The two-in-one package will arrive on Switch this summer!

SWITCH PUBLISHER: BANDAI NAMCO
DEVELOPERS: BANDAI NAMCO, MONOLITH SOFT & TRI-CRESCENDO
RELEASE: SUMMER 2023 RATING: RP

Originally published on GameCube in 2004 and 2006 respectively, Baten Kaitos I & II are from the minds of Monolith Soft (Xenoblade Chronicles) and tri-Crescendo (Eternal Sonata). It's also worth noting other original staff involved in the games included writer/director Masato Kato (Chrono Trigger, Chrono Cross) and composer Motoi Sakuraba (Tales of, Dark Souls, Star Ocean).

In both entries, you don't assume the role of the games' protagonists. Instead, you guide them by playing as a spirit who provides council. In this role, characters will seemingly break the fourth wall to ask you questions. It's an interesting concept, as your dialogue choices will influence your relationships with the protagonists.

Baten Kaitos I features a world where people possess wings and live in the sky, after the lands below became too barren to inhabit. Protagonist Kalas begins a journey of revenge, and in true JRPG fashion he becomes wrapped up in more complicated circumstances along the way.

Baten Kaitos II is a prequel that takes place 20 years before the first game. Some characters return via cameos, so it's likely best to play this one after the first. Its premise involves protagonist Sagi being framed for an assassination and then embroiled in a political struggle among different nations.

Both games utilize systems built around magical cards that can capture and store pretty much anything, from weapons and armor to food items. These cards, known as Magnus, can be used both in and outside of combat.

There are over a thousand of them, and they often change and evolve on their own. For example, a 2004 GameSpot review pointed out that if you keep a Magnus storing milk long enough, it will curdle and turn into cheese. It's a good thing too, as cheese provides more healing than milk!

In combat, characters use decks composed of Magnus, and these cards can attack, defend, heal, supply elemental energy and create combos. Cards are dealt at random when your party is engaged with a foe, and deck customization is key. You'll be changing out cards often depending on the enemies you face!

The remasters feature Japanese voice-over with English subtitles. (The previous English dub will no longer be available.) They also include graphical, UI and framerate improvements along with quality-of-life upgrades such as auto-battles, auto-saves, game and battle speed adjustments and the ability to skip cutscenes and turn off encounters entirely.

The remasters will also have both New Game Plus and New Game Minus modes, with the former making the experience easier and the latter making it more difficult.

When they first released, Baten Kaitos I & II received praise from critics. However, sales didn't meet expectations; plans for a third game were scrapped, and the series hasn't seen any updates until now. I think 2023 will prove to be a good time for it to get a second chance! **— MAGGIE**

FASHION DREAMER

Is your style still savvy?

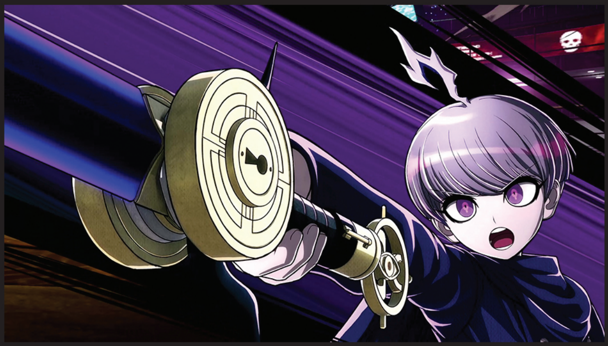
WHEN IT COMES to cult classics, hindsight's always 20/20 – games that may have seemed less exciting compared to the newest Zelda eventually become hidden gems once they hit the right audience down the road. One such niche has been Style Savvy, a series of DS and 3DS titles that each straddled the line between being an interactive lookbook fashion show and a boutique management sim, all with an addictive gameplay loop and some of the most lowkey flavorful writing to come out of Nintendo.

Now, syn Sophia, the developers of Style Savvy, are back – not with a sequel, but with a spiritual successor called Fashion Dreamer. Announced during the most recent Nintendo Direct, Fashion Dreamer was a real surprise for Style Savvy fans, bringing the virtual closet experience to consoles for the very first time.

Instead of tasking players with running a store and walking the runway, Fashion Dreamer seems to be taking its cues from the culture surrounding fashion – from social media to arcade photobooths and even the dress-up mechanics popularized by Animal Crossing: New Horizons. Players create and dress up an avatar called a Muse using over 1,400 accessories – and those accessories can then be shared with other Muses around the world to exchange Likes and outfits.

Players even get to build out their own virtual showrooms to set the perfect mood to proudly display their customized outfits. So far we've seen a variety of getups that can be built, with an entire mall of clothing items that can be combined and fully customized, right down to the color of the fabric. It's exciting already thinking about what sorts of outfits and aesthetics enthusiastic fans of syn Sophia's previous outings will share online in the transition from Style Savvy. The new social angle could be just the thing to bring in a new generation of fashionistas when it hits the catwalk later this year! **– JOHN-CHARLES**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: XSEED GAMES DEVELOPER: SYN SOPHIA RELEASE: TBA 2023 RATING: RP



MASTER DETECTIVE ARCHIVES: RAIN CODE

Solve the ultimate mystery in a perpetually rainy city.

IF YOU'VE PLAYED anything from the Danganronpa series, it won't take long to notice how Master Detective Archives: Rain Code takes inspiration from it.

Danganronpa scenario writer Kazutaka Kodaka, composer Masafumi Takada and designer Rui Komatsuzaki have all lent their talents to this new title, supplying the series' trademark mystery-solving premise, zany music and detailed, vibrant character designs, respectively.

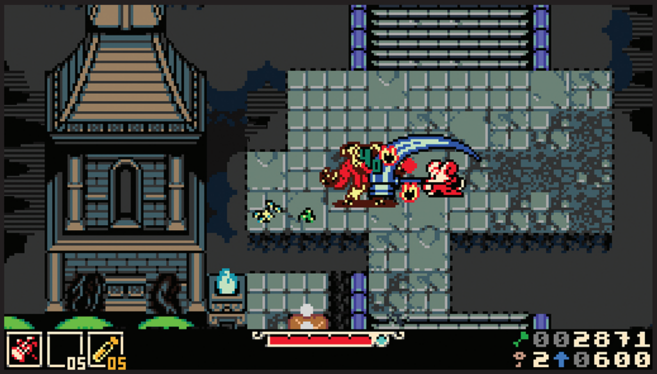
With the familiar style and themes intact, Rain Code will offer a new type of adventure. It features fully 3D environments and characters, and it ditches Danganronpa's school-based settings for the dark and perpetually rainy Kanai Ward, where the Amaterasu Corporation maintains control and plenty of mysteries need solving. It's here where we'll take on the role of detective-in-training Yuma. He's lost his memories and is haunted by a spirit named Shinigami, who has major Junko Enoshima energy. (If you know, you know). She's dead set on making him a successful sleuth, and they begin working with the World Detective Organization and their Master Detectives.

These detectives possess special skills, dubbed Forensic Fortes, to aid in uncovering the truth. For example, Desuhiko Thunderbolt is a master of disguise, Pucci Lavmin uses her Audial Aptitude ability to hear even a heartbeat and Fubuki Clockford can leap through time!

Yuma can access the Fortes at different parts of the game. They'll also come in handy while navigating the Mystery Labyrinth: an alternate dimension full of puzzles and enemies that materialize as you start to crack the case.

Rain Code will arrive on June 30, and I'm interested to see how it unites its Danganronpa roots with new concepts! **– MAGGIE**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: SPIKE CHUNSOFT RELEASE: JUNE 30, 2023 RATING: M



MINA THE HOLLOWER

Hands-on impressions from playing it at PAX!

YACHT CLUB GAMES' next big title does a lot with a little. In screenshots, it looks like a Game Boy Color title, flat and simple. But when you play it, a massive feeling of depth quickly sets in, rife with multiple emotions. Discouragement, desperation, bemusement, elation and even a little sadness were a few of the feelings that welled within me during my 30 minutes with Mina at PAX East 2023. But the main feeling behind Mina is love, specifically for video games. The team behind Mina isn't consciously trying to make the game about their own emotions, but their passion for puzzling through the creative process of game design constantly comes to the surface, regardless.

This build adds two new weapons to the mix. In addition to the Nightstar, Mina's spiked-ball whip, there's a huge hammer called the Blaststrike Maul, as well as two speedy daggers named Whisper and Vesper. The game is a top-down action exploration title, something akin to Link's Awakening crossed with classic Castlevania, but these alternate weapons take their cues from different sources entirely.

Holding the hammer allows you to do a dodge roll, making play more like Monster Hunter or Bloodborne — games where memorizing your exact number of invincibility frames can make the difference between life and death. The daggers give off a wilder, hack-and-slash feeling. Spamming them can yield decent results. They can also be thrown, leaving you partially defenseless.

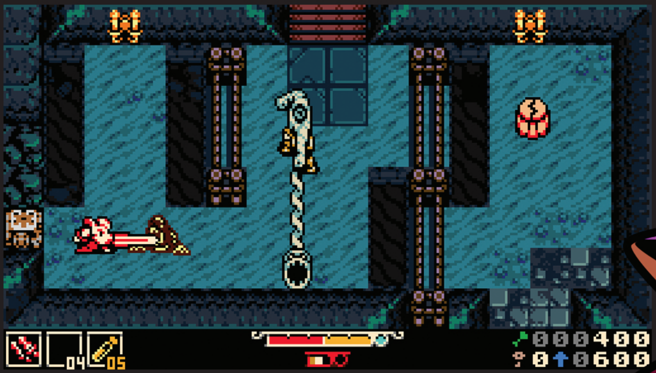
On top of getting to know your arsenal, you'll also need to bone up on your enemies' behavior. Darting skeletal birds, zombies who attack with either their top or bottom halves (depending on how they're split) and necromancers who can bring defeated monsters back to life all need to be studied before they can be dispatched with ease.

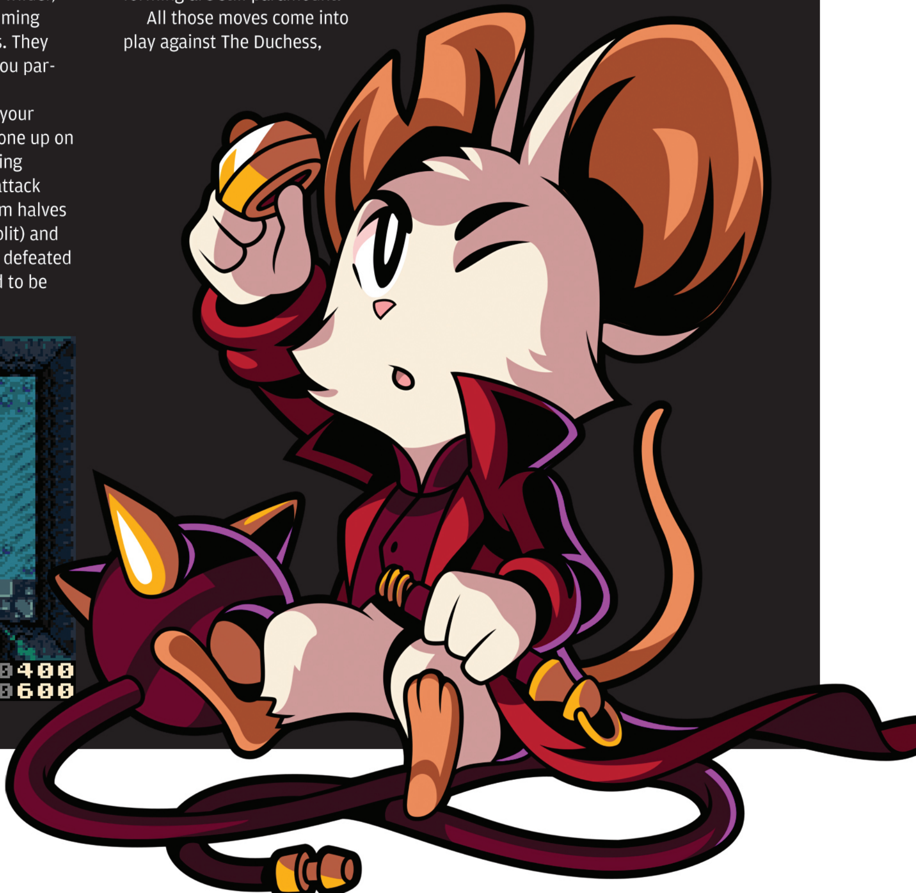
On top of all of those combat options, you can also evade enemies by jumping, or just digging underneath them. The digging mechanic, a.k.a. "hollowing," is what really sets Mina apart from the pack. It can be used to go under enemies and obstacles, pick up items and even perform a Mario-style running jump. While the new weapons were the big new feature in this PAX East 2023 demo, the character movement and platforming are still paramount.

All those moves come into play against The Duchess, a Lovecraftian creature with a body horror twist, reminiscent of John Carpenter's film The Thing, whose appearance caps off the demo.

Yacht Club Games' Sean Velasco says The Thing might be a perfect movie, and likewise, he and his team might have a perfect game on their hands with Mina. We'll find out for ourselves when it releases later this year — and you'll get to see what kinds of emotions it makes you feel when you get to play it! **— JONATHAN**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: YACHT CLUB GAMES RELEASE: DECEMBER 2023 RATING: RP





SEA OF STARS

Hands-on impressions from playing the demo!

IF YOU WERE to look up a list of the greatest RPGs of all time, chances are you'd find Chrono Trigger ranked among the best of the best. Square's timeless SNES classic is one of the most beloved examples of the genre, and it still stands the test of time (ha!) today. Strangely enough, even though the game is loved dearly by fans and critics, attempts to follow it up have never quite lived up to its lofty reputation. From Chrono Cross to Xenogears to various indie attempts, many games have claimed to invoke the spirit of Chrono Trigger, but few, if any, have delivered.

That may be about to change.

Sea of Stars is a new traditional turn-based RPG created by the studio behind 2018's The Messenger. Where that game was designed to pay homage to the likes of both Ninja Gaiden and Metroid, Sea of Stars aims to recapture the magic of Chrono Trigger – and after playing the demo, I'm thinking they might just pull it off.

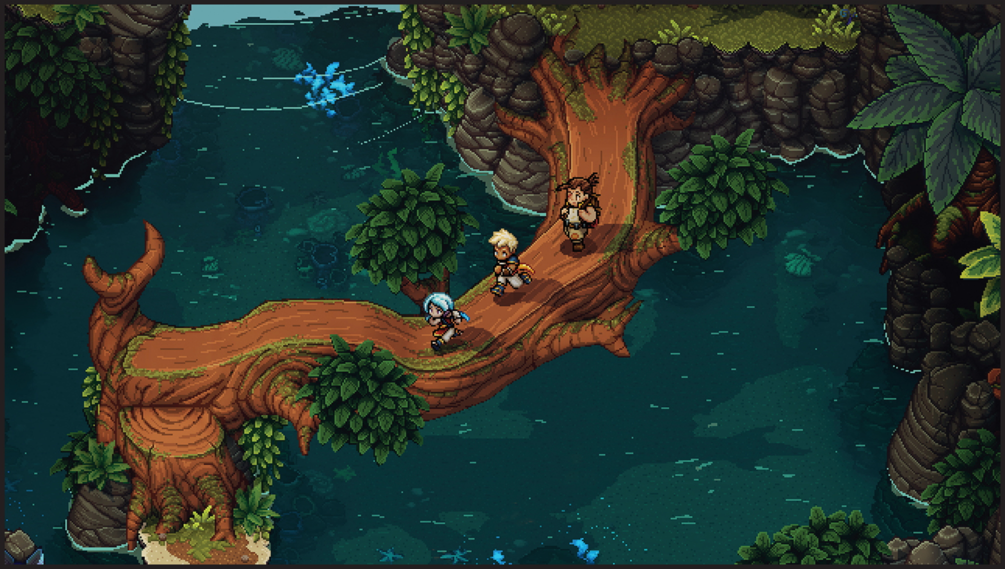
Sea of Stars wears its inspirations right on its sleeve. Just like in Chrono Trigger there are no random encounters – battles take place right there on the play field, and there's a special emphasis on unique team-up moves for different combinations of characters. It's not all retreads of old mechanics, though, as some more modern features are there to help keep things feeling fresh. Your characters have a lot more traversal options like jumping, walking across ropes and even pushing things around for some environmental puzzle action. During combat, enemies leave behind energy that players can absorb to power up specific attacks. There's a system where specific combinations can cancel out an enemy's moves, and timed hits are available for both offensive and defensive maneuvers. So while the core of the action feels very Chrono Trigger, there's no shortage of modern RPG advancements on display.

Sea of Stars is also drop-dead gorgeous. It features some of the most jaw-dropping pixel art I've ever seen, and it moves with just the right amount of fluidity to make it feel modern – but not so smooth that it loses that retro feel. It's truly a sight to behold.

The bulk of the game's music comes by way of RainbowDragonEyes, who composed the stellar soundtrack to The Messenger. There are also guest tracks by Yasunori Mitsuda, who is known for his work in games like Xenogears, the original Mario Party and, you guessed it, Chrono Trigger.

One of the biggest mysteries to still be uncovered about Sea of Stars is what its story is going to be like. The demo has a handful of very charming interactions, but it's such a small slice that it's hard to get a real feel for what's going on. It's also somehow connected to The Messenger, which could mean a number of things. There's more than one musical callback to the Sunken Shrine area from that game, so it stands to reason there will be some sort of connection there – but if you've ever played The Messenger, you know that two of its defining traits are its huge gameplay shift about halfway through the adventure and its hilariously witty writing. All the dialogue in the Sea of Stars demo was well done, but none of it felt quite as clever as what The Messenger contained. Will there be a comedy element in the final game? Will it suddenly change genres halfway through? We'll have to wait and see!

Regardless, if Sea of Stars can manage to live up to its potential, we might have a true all-time great on our hands. August can't come soon enough! **– KRIS**



SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: SABOTAGE STUDIO RELEASE: AUGUST 29, 2023 RATING: E10+

PROFESSOR LAYTON
AND THE NEW WORLD OF STEAM

The puzzle-solving professional is coming out of retirement!

AS THE GOOD Professor Hershel Layton always says, "Every puzzle has an answer." But for the last few years, the most confounding conundrums confronting his fans have been "Will we ever get a new Professor Layton game?" and "When?". Now we have answers to both: yes, and soon!

. . . Well, hopefully soon. Level-5 hasn't actually confirmed a release date yet.

When we last left our heroes Professor Layton and his trusty assistant Luke, they had gone their separate ways at the end of the DS adventure Professor Layton and the Unwound Future. (The more recent 3DS games took place chronologically before the two of them parted company.) Luke sailed across the Atlantic in a move to America, leaving Layton behind in England. But as this new adventure begins, the Professor receives a letter from Luke inviting him to make the journey to the New World himself – because there's a fresh mystery to solve in Luke's new hometown!

The city Luke has relocated to is called Steam Bison, and true to its name, steam technology drives every aspect of its society. Steam engine-powered cars and trains fill the city. Layton himself arrives by riding on a steam-driven airship, and once he lands he's greeted by Luke, who's driving a two-legged steam-powered mech! It's a wild new setting for the two to explore for sure, and I can't wait to get started solving puzzles in this all-new place.

The creation of those puzzles, Level-5 says, has been outsourced to a group of notable riddlemakers in Japan called QuizKnock. They may be unknown to most of us in the West, but in Japan they have a dedicated following and run a YouTube channel with 2,000,000 subscribers! We'll see what puzzles they cook up for the now unretired Professor to solve! **– LUCAS**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: LEVEL-5 RELEASE: TBA RATING: RP

FANTASY LIFE i:
THE GIRL WHO STEALS TIME

Level-5's also bringing this brand back to life!

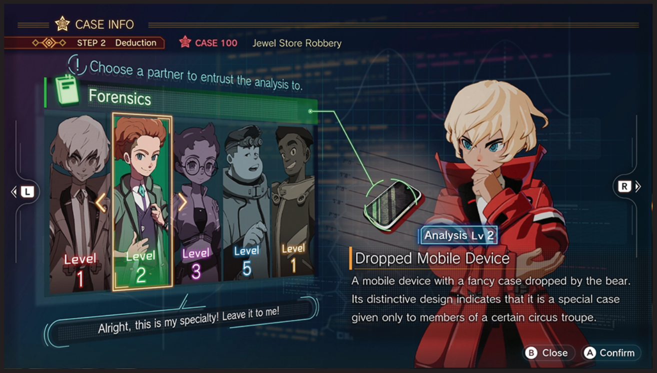
LEVEL-5'S FANTASY LIFE was one of the more unexpectedly pleasant surprises to come out of the Nintendo 3DS era. While I'm not a hardcore RPG person myself, the charm of choosing your own path in life from one of several "Life Classes" as a Blacksmith, Hunter, Carpenter, Miner or Mercenary (among others), while following a larger overarching story, was too much to resist.

A sequel of sorts was planned, which ultimately became Fantasy Life Online, dropping the sequel concept as the developers wanted to see it as a new title, rather than having it tied to the first. Of course, unless you were paying particular attention to the mobile gaming space, there's a good chance that one passed you by. It reached over 2,000,000 downloads in Japan in nine days, but closed shop in North America in February of this year. Fortunately, just three days later, a new installment was announced!

Coming to the Nintendo Switch (actually, what else would it be coming to at this point, if we're talking about it?) this year, Fantasy Life i: The Girl Who Steals Time seems to be taking a page from Animal Crossing's recent playbook, as you arrive on a new island, where you have to build up a city. Also like Animal Crossing (albeit more deliberately, and hopefully with less system clock finagling), this installment features time travel as an element! You'll have to Marty McFly your way back and forth between the present and the past in order to solve a mystery.

Customize your own avatar, choose from Life Classes such as Paladin, Woodcutter and Cook (or all of them!), and work on changing your house, the city and even the island itself to better suit your liking. It's like Career Day in the palm of your hands (with dragons)! **– DAVID**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: LEVEL-5 RELEASE: TBA 2023 RATING: RP



DECA POLICE

And to complete the trio, Level-5's also presenting a brand-new IP!

IF NEW SEQUELS in the Professor Layton and Fantasy Life series weren't enough for you already, here's another piece of evidence that Level-5 is planning to make a major comeback: a brand-new IP!

Deca Police is a detective RPG that's set to release later this year on the Switch and PlayStation platforms. From what we've seen so far, it looks to be a combination of elements you'd find in other Level-5 series (RPG elements from Ni no Kuni, etc., and a mystery-solving premise from Professor Layton) that will provide a new experience to players at the same time.

Deca Police takes place in the shiny metropolis of Broadstone, where crime and corruption run rampant under the surface. Players will take on the role of a rookie detective named Harvard Marks and his team within the Broadstone Police Center's Special Investigations Unit.

Harvard, with his keen mind and passion for tracking down criminals, leads the group. He's joined by his best friend Carl Oxford, a negotiation expert; hacker extraordinaire Zhang Tsinghua; Manimani Manoa, a profiling prodigy; and martial arts master Mikey Princeton.

Together, the team uses a virtual world called Decasim to hone their detective skills. Decasim is an exact copy of Broadstone in terms of setting and happenings. It helps train the new detectives and allows them to see events unfold in the virtual world, so they can find clues in the real world.

Players will be able to go back and forth between the two worlds as they work on cases, and many mysteries await. The story involves investigating a hacker who's messing with Decasim and a gruesome serial killer known as "The Clown." (No relation to Gotham City's Joker, of course.)

Solving cases requires going through a number of phases. In the investigation phase, you'll examine crime scenes, collect clues and speak to witnesses.

Next is the Deduction Phase. You'll move clues from the Evidence Table to the Case Board and map out connections on a large and chaotic bulletin board that would make It's Always Sunny's Charlie Kelly proud. Then, you'll progress to the Thinking Vision phase to double-check your work and eventually select the culprit.

Sometimes suspects will go willingly — and sometimes they won't, leading to the game's turn-based combat system. You'll control three characters from the team at a time, with the end goal of apprehending culprits rather than eliminating them.

Negotiating with enemies is a crucial part of combat, and if you succeed, the suspect will surrender and admit guilt. I enjoy when games give players options to avoid a fight — or at least shorten it through dialogue options or other means. It'll be cool to see how this connects with what you find in investigations and how your own choices and actions can affect how the cases unfold.

Negotiations won't always work, and sometimes, enemies in Decasim will turn into powerful beings called Crime Beasts. These monsters have to be taken out, and Harvard and the team must get permission from headquarters to use their strongest abilities against them.

It's encouraging to see the release forecast fill up with Level-5 titles once again. The company has famously been troubled by the process of localizing their games in a timely manner, leading to many releases that lagged behind their Japanese source material by several years, or sometimes never got an English version at all! (Yo-kai Watch 4 being a particularly notable one.) They shut down North American operations entirely a few years ago! But with games like Deca Police here, it seems like they're planning a new global push. We can't wait! **— MAGGIE**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: LEVEL-5 RELEASE: TBA 2023
RATING: RP

PUZZLE BOBBLE EVERYBUBBLE!

Bub and Bob will bust a move once again.

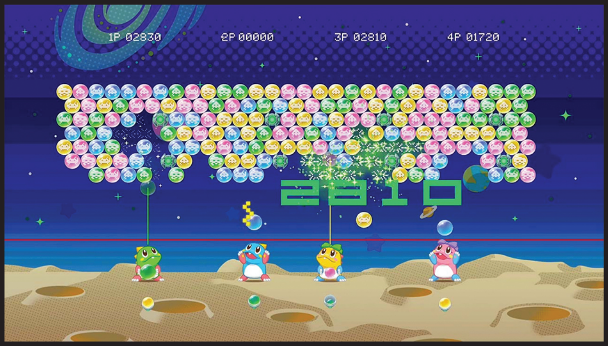
2024 WILL MARK the 30th anniversary of the Puzzle Bobble series, but Taito and ININ Games are getting the celebration started one year early by launching the brand-new Puzzle Bobble Everybubble! in time for the brand's 29th birthday.

Originally localized with the title "Bust-a-Move" for its first few releases in the West starting back in 1994, the Puzzle Bobble series is a spin-off of the Bubble Bobble brand and stars the same set of cute bubble-blowing dinosaurs. But rather than make their own bubbles in this puzzler, they're working to pop huge walls of other bubbles that are threatening to overrun their peaceful island home!

You take control of a dino hero and stand at the bottom of the screen with one bubble at a time ready to launch into the wall of encroaching enemy bubbles above. Using a pointer to direct the angle of your intended toss, you try to line up a shot that will result in your bubble hitting other bubbles of the same color — if three or more matching bubbles collide, then all are popped and removed from play. Clear them all, and win!

That core Puzzle Bobble design is the same now as it was three decades ago, but freshly added for this new Switch sequel are a four-player co-op mode and a two-on-two versus mode. This release will also include "Puzzle Bobble vs. Space Invaders" where the bubbles will have the classic 1978 Invader sprites inside, and the dinos will only be able to toss straight up and move left and right, just like the Earth-defending tank in the old-school arcade game. And hey, Space Invaders just hit 45 years old itself, so this release celebrates that anniversary as well! **— LUCAS**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: ININ GAMES
DEVELOPER: TAITO
RELEASE: MAY 23, 2023 RATING: E



ETRIAN ODYSSEY ORIGINS COLLECTION

Three DS adventures get a combined HD encore.

THOUGH THE SWITCH has been a spectacular sales success over the last six years, its total number of units sold is still catching up to Nintendo's biggest success story ever: the DS. With over 154 million original DS, DS Lite and DSi bought worldwide and nearly a billion — yes, that's *billion* with a "b" — total games also purchased by players, the DS era has solidified itself as one of the greatest chapters in Big N history!

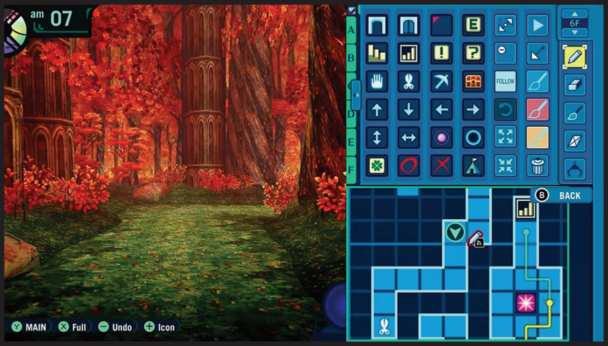
. . . And left us with a ton of great games that are kind of hard to move onto any more modern machine.

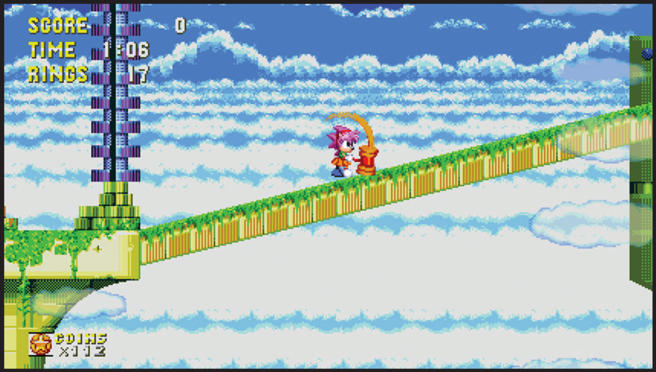
The DS' touch-based interface and two-screen visual display were great at the time, but games that were originally designed around those specific specifications now have quite an uphill battle to fight if they want to be ported to any newer system without them.

Case in point: the Etrian Odyssey games. This series of first-person dungeon crawlers presented its heroes' viewpoint on the upper DS display, then dedicated the lower touchscreen to being a mapmaking area where players would manually keep track of their own progress through each labyrinth. That tactile cartography was a big part of their appeal! So will playing these games again without that component still feel fun?

The new Etrian Odyssey Origins Collection is bringing the first three games in the saga to the Switch, but in order to do so, it's brought in a compromise: You can enjoy bold new HD visuals in their full glory on your TV, but then you'll miss out on touch-controlled mapmaking. Or you can play it in Handheld Mode to still be able to use touch controls . . . but the shiny first-person view gets cropped and smooshed over out of the way. Neither is perfect, but we may never get a perfect solution for DS ports! **— LUCAS**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: SEGA
DEVELOPER: ATLUS
RELEASE: JUNE 1, 2023 RATING: T





SONIC ORIGINS PLUS

The retro collection expands with Game Gear classics and playable Amy!

BOY, AM I glad I held off on buying Sonic Origins!

Last year's retro Sonic compilation, released on the 32nd anniversary of the Genesis original, seemed like a dream come true. It collected programmer Christian Whitehead's highly lauded mobile editions of Sonic 1, 2 and CD, along with a brand-new remaster of Sonic 3 & Knuckles by Whitehead and Sonic Mania studio Headcannon, all which featured widescreen formatting, additional playable characters and restored beta content. Doesn't that just sound perfect?

Unfortunately, in order to meet that anniversary deadline, Sega published a product in need of further fine-tuning. We're talking broken Tails AI, blurry image scaling, erratic sound mixing, improper physics . . . bugs not present in the previous Whitehead releases that surfaced here because of how the individual games were integrated into the wrapper. Reviews deemed the bundle decent for casual players, yet a far cry from the definitive experience we were promised.

But just as Sonic Mania resurfaced with a fresh coat of paint as Sonic Mania Plus, so too will Origins receive a glow-up — and this time, Headcannon is more intimately involved in the overall package! There've been no specific details regarding what will be improved, though given the additional development time allotted this update following the previous patch two months out from launch, we can safely expect the fixes to be comprehensive.

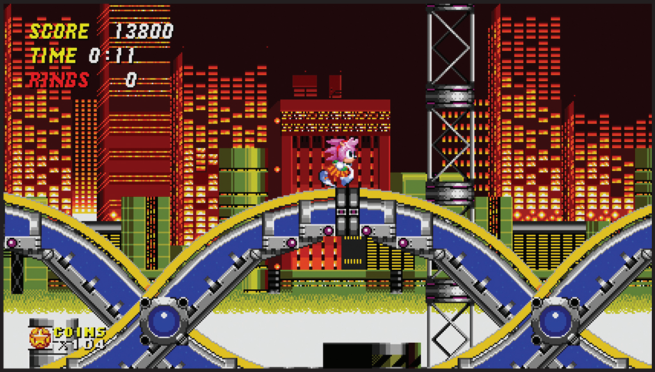
Bringing Origins up to a proper baseline state of quality wouldn't be cause enough to celebrate alone, which is why Plus is also delivering expanded content. Previously, you could play as Sonic, Tails or Knuckles in all four titles save for CD, which left the brash echidna on the bench. Well, no longer! He's now ready to tackle the crisis on the Little Planet, enticed by a new route exclusive to his mighty fists. Even better is the addition of playable Amy Rose across the library, marking her first return to 2D since the Advance trilogy! (I refuse to count Sonic Boom on 3DS, so don't @ me!)

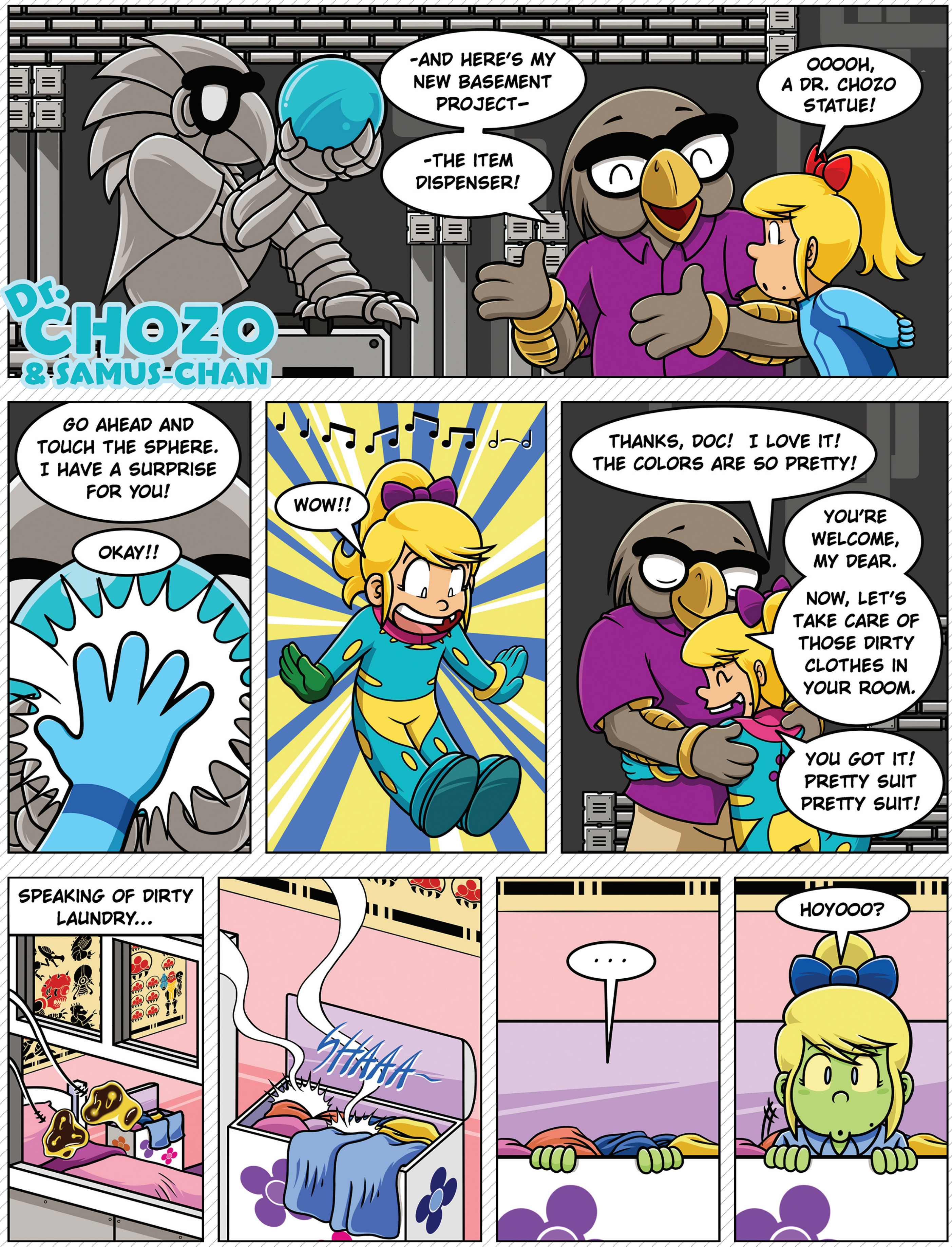
None of these upgrades change the fact that Origins covers a paltry four games from Sonic's history, whereas past compilations featured a much wider selection. That too has been addressed with the addition of all 12 of Sonic's Game Gear exploits: Sonic 1 and 2, Sonic Chaos, Sonic Triple Trouble, Sonic Blast, Sonic Spinball, Sonic Labyrinth, Sonic Drift 1 and 2, Tails Adventure, Tails' Skypatrol and Dr. Robotnik's Mean Bean Machine, presented in all their 8-bit glory!

The Game Gear representation, though appreciated, does draw attention to the wares ultimately not included. Why not the Genesis versions of Spinball and Mean Bean Machine, for instance? And what of Sonic 3D Blast and Knuckles' Chaotix, the latter forever doomed to its 32X prison? Those omissions at least are understandable, as their inclusion would lead players to expect a similar kind of remaster treatment as done to the base lineup. Probably too great an undertaking on Headcannon's part in too short a time span. In contrast, Game Gear content presented as-is seems like a more palatable bonus treat. Still, I lament that Sega didn't opt for the Master System versions, with their larger viewing windows better suited to Sonic's high speed.

The bug fixes sans new content will likely be available as a free patch, so don't feel pressured into spending more if you're satisfied with the standard experience. For everyone else, look forward to Sonic Origins Plus on June 23 as a DLC upgrade, an all-in-one digital package or an all-new physical edition! **— TONY**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: SEGA DEVELOPERS: SONIC TEAM & HEADCANNON
RELEASE: JUNE 23, 2023 RATING: E





BY THOR THORVALDSON

HIGH-RISE LIVING

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: TWILIGHT PRINCESS
GAMECUBE & Wii, 2006

Ever since the first airing of The Jetsons, mankind has yearned to live in the clouds. But in the kingdom of Hyrule, some odd-looking chickenfolk got there first!

After The Minish Cap chronicled Link's first trip into the sky but before Skyward Sword made the floating city of Skyloft its central setting, the Zelda series presented one other high-altitude destination for our hero to visit: City in the Sky, the seventh dungeon in Twilight Princess. As the first such location to be featured in a 3D Zelda, the vertigo factor was amped up immensely! You could really feel the tension when crossing over gaps in the floor when you knew nothing but a miles-long drop back to terra firma awaited you if you fell.

The dungeon was called City in the Sky because, apparently, it was meant to be the center of civilization for the Oocca, a disturbing race with the bodies of birds but the faces of humans (and unsettlingly dead-looking eyes). Their home was being terrorized by a dragon named Argorok, and Link was forced to face him in a high-flying, death-defying battle using his Double Clawshots.

Also, Link came and went from this place by getting shot out of a cannon. Aiyee!!!!! — **LUCAS**

CHARACTER PROFILE
GANONDORF

The menacing, malevolent, maniacal man form of the Zelda series' recurring antagonist Ganon, this villain swept into the saga 25 years ago and has made it his mission to terrorize multiple generations of Links. His next resurrection is nigh, so let's prepare ourselves for it!

FIRST APPEARANCE
THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: OCARINA OF TIME **(N64, 1998)**

CAREER HIGHS

He made his true debut on the N64, appearing to intimidate players in the very first cutscene of the game. Truly a villain worth vanquishing!

'98

After knocking him down, Nintendo then restored his respect with a spectacular redesign in Twilight Princess. This was a true King of Thieves.

'06

The Smash series, while still never fully separating him from his Falcon clone roots, has differentiated the 'Dorf more and more over the years.

'18

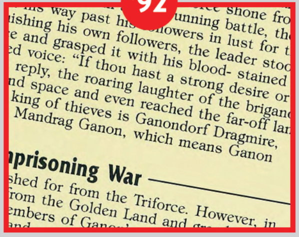
Ganondorf's attendance record has been inconsistent since his debut, as some Zelda series installments have featured him prominently, while others have used only his original pig wizard form, Ganon. And some ignore both and use other antagonists!

'23

Tears of the Kingdom, however, will once again bring Ganondorf back from the dead. More literally than ever! He's a creepy reanimated corpse before being fully revived! (But he looks healthy afterward!)

CAREER LOWS

'92



...his way past hi... shone fro...
...ishing his own followers ...unning battle, th...
...e and grasped it with his blood- stained...
...ed voice: "If thou hast a strong desire or...
...reply, the roaring laughter of the brigand...
...nd space and even reached the far-off lan...
...king of thieves is Ganondorf Dragmire,
Mandrag Ganon, which means Ganon

...prisoning War

...shed for from the Triforce. However, in
...rom the Golden Land and ...
...embers of Gan...

Ganondorf was first named in the SNES era – but only in plain text in the instruction manual for The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past.

'01

Ganondorf became so popular that he was added to the Smash Bros. roster . . . but only as a clone of Captain Falcon's moveset.

'03

Link always defeats Ganondorf in the end, but his loss in The Wind Waker was particularly embarrassing. (He had a, let's say, splitting headache.)

HIGHLIGHTS

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: OCARINA OF TIME
N64, 1998

Ganondorf's first appearance was a great one, as he first threatened Link and Zelda as children, then took over the kingdom of Hyrule while our hero slept for seven years. Fighting back against his evil across two eras of time and ultimately facing off against him in a final showdown at the end of the quest was incredible!

HYRULE WARRIORS
Wii U, 2014

Ganondorf has had several different looks over the years, from the rotund Wind Waker wizard to the muscular punch machine of Smash Bros. My favorite of all his incarnations, though, is in Hyrule Warriors. There he's a powerful – and fully playable – war commander, rushing out into massive battles in person as he leads his army of darkness against the forces of good!

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: TEARS OF THE KINGDOM
SWITCH, 2023

Ganondorf has been central to the story of Tears of the Kingdom from its very first reveal trailer, which showed us Link and Zelda stumbling upon his decaying dead body in a cavern deep beneath Hyrule Castle. But then he creepily sprang back to life! I guess we'll just have to send him back to the grave one more time, huh?

BY LUCAS M. THOMAS

"Pathetic little fool! Do you realize who you're dealing with? I am Ganondorf! And soon, I will rule the world!"

- THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: OCARINA OF TIME (N64, 1998)

IT'S NEW TO ME!
WARIO LAND 3

Is this specific sequel the standout of Wario's sidescrolling series?

NINTENDO RECENTLY ADDED Game Boy games to the Switch Online subscription service, and among the launch lineup was, I'll admit, one title that I've never previously gotten around to trying: the third Wario Land. So I fired it up for the first time, thinking I'd get something similar to the experience of other adventures in the Wario Land series.

I did not!

Wario Land 3 is almost entirely its own thing, and the thing that it is is *dense*. There are a whole lot of different ingredients mixed in to make this one sequel, and it's honestly a little overwhelming!

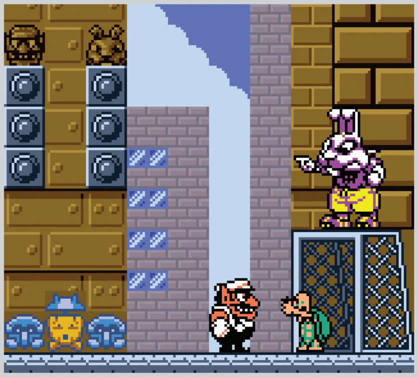
First up is an idea returning from Wario Land II, and that's that Wario can't die. He's immortal in this game, as rather than cause him to lose lives, enemy characters instead force shape changes onto Wario's body. A donut-tossing little chef causes him to fatten up to be a supersized heavyweight, for example – or you might come across a zombie who makes Wario into a shambling undead creature. All of these transformations are temporary, and each pulls double duty as being both a time-losing penalty for poor platforming, but also a puzzle-solving solution that you must occasionally inflict upon yourself on purpose. Need to burn someting flammable? Locate a source of flame and set Wario's pants on fire. He'll run like a madman in pain as his butt blazes brightly, but that'll also give you a chance to scorch through the fire-weak obstacle in your way!

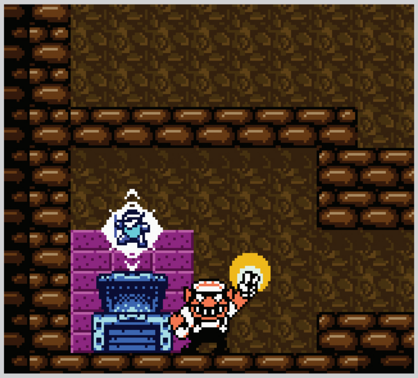
This kind of deliberate self-damage is how Wario makes his way through each level, every one of which is a self-contained Metroidvania map that can be explored in any direction with no time limit. That's another big element here: exploration. Wario Land 3 is very hands-off with explaining much of anything, so it's up to you to stumble and bumble around trying to find the right way forward. You'll eventually figure out that finding keys and unlocking treasure chests has a ripple effect on the world map, opening up new levels or causing old ones to change in some way. For an example there, at one point Wario finds a treasure that causes big beanstalks to sprout in several earlier stages – you can then go back to them and climb those vines to access areas that were previously unreachable.

There's also a day-and-night cycle! Every stage has two different versions, with enemies and placement of platforming elements often altered depending on whether or not the sun is up whenever you enter.

Finally, this game is a long haul. Maybe I should have sought it out back in the GBC era when it first came out, because I surely had more free time back then and could have more leisurely explored every nook and cranny. Even the speedrun for the 100% category of this game still takes around four hours – so you can bet that a casual playthrough, going in blind, is going to clock in well above that.

Wario Land 3 is always a game I've had a mild amount of interest in, but never enough to really find the time to seek it out and really get invested. That's the beauty of Nintendo Switch Online's way of doing things – because I suddenly had access to this title without having to do anything extra, I finally gave it a shot. I don't know if it's as much of a hidden gem as some claim, as it can be frustrating a lot of the time. But it is worth at least a look! **— LUCAS**





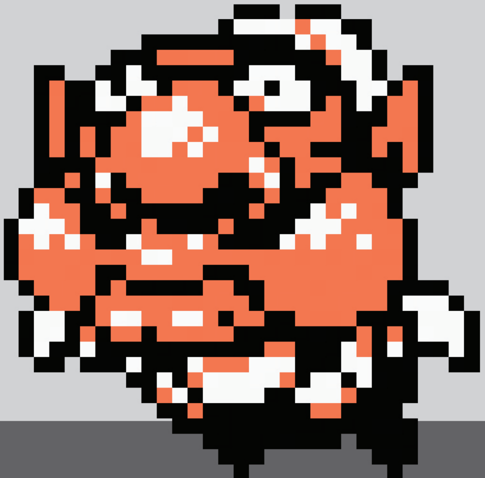
ORIGINAL RELEASE: GAME BOY COLOR, MAY 30, 2000 PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: NINTENDO

PLAYING IT TODAY

The reason this article was written was because Wario Land 3 suddenly became easily accessible on the Switch this past February when it was selected to be part of the Day 1 launch lineup for Nintendo Switch Online's new Game Boy app. (Both Game Boy and Game Boy Color titles like this one share that same launcher.) Before that it was available via 3DS Virtual Console, but that option's gone now, so the only other legal choice is seeking out an original GBC cartridge. They're not too terribly expensive over on eBay.

THE DR. MARIO 64 CONNECTION

I'm surprised that I never played Wario Land 3, if only because the closely related Dr. Mario 64 is one of my favorite games ever! The cast of playable characters in that specific Dr. Mario sequel was drawn from Wario Land 3 for some reason, meaning weirdos that would have otherwise been one-offs, like Rudy the Clown, got an unexpected second appearance.



CONTROLLER REVIEWS

LEGACYGC

Retro-Bit has scrapped the stick.

THE N64 WAS the first Nintendo system to come packed with an analog stick controller, but as we chronicled in NF #64, the ongoing legacy of that console is something of a mixed bag. Part of that is because analog controls aren't always the best! Compared to the SNES D-Pad, the N64 controller was pretty overwhelming, with more mushy and messy character movement than we were used to. The multiple inputs and forced analog experiences only got more intense once the GameCube hit the scene. Its default controller has two different sizes of analog sticks, two analog bumpers, a weird, almost-embarrassed-to-be-there Z Button hiding on one side and one of the smallest and stiffest D-Pads in gaming history. It's enough to make an old man cry!

Well weep no more, middle-aged gamers! This brand-new controller for the 22-year-old console feels more like the SNES pad than anything else. It's got the four Cube face buttons, big and comfy L and R triggers on top and adorably small ZL and ZR Buttons tucked in next to them. But the real shocker is, the LegacyGC has no analog sticks at all! Instead, it uses macros to trick the GameCube into thinking the D-Pad is the left analog stick. So not only is the controller ideal for games that were designed with the D-Pad in mind – like Alien Hominid, Capcom vs. SNK 2, WarioWare, Inc.: Mega Party Games! and the Mega Man X Collection – but it lets you play games that were designed for analog – like Resident Evil 4, Animal Crossing and Super Smash Bros. Melee – with the D-Pad too.

All three of those latter games mostly only use the C-Stick for optional camera control, so playing them with this stickless wonder doesn't cut you off from much. In fact, the digital-only input actually helps to make Leon's aim somewhat less sloppy in Resident Evil 4! And in Melee, the D-Pad makes you move at full tilt at all times. It definitely won't be the controller of choice for competitive players, but if you just want to do a quick run through Adventure Mode, there's little about the LegacyGC that will hold you back.

The pad also functions with Wii games that have GameCube controller options. I tested it out with Metal Slug Anthology and Data East's Arcade Classics Collection. Both worked great! The only times it offered a substantial downgrade was with titles that were specifically designed to use the "real" Cube controller's C-Stick and analog bumpers on a consistent basis, like Super Mario Sunshine. Trying to play through Pikmin without the ability to manually move your alien carrot kid army around was also unnecessarily difficult.

Harkening back to the NES Advantage, the LegacyGC also lets you activate turbo mode, making your buttons automatically mash when you hold them down.

Overall, the LegacyGC is less intimidating and confusing compared to the GameCube's official controller. If you're an older gamer looking to replay some GameCube favorites with a D-Pad or a new fan with no attachment to analog sticks, Retro-Bit has you covered.
– JONATHAN

8.5

BATTLERGC

For serious GameCube action.

SHIGERU MIYAMOTO ONCE claimed the GameCube controller would become the industry standard in 10 years' time. So how true is that statement almost 22 years later? Video game controllers have actually standardized in a much less radical direction, but the GCN pad's oblique design is still the stuff of legend. Unfortunately, this means that both original and officially reproduced controllers fetch a somewhat high price on the aftermarket.

Retro Fighters has stepped up to address the demand for affordable quality Cube controllers with one of their latest experiments, the BattlerGC. This replica controller boasts compatibility with the original GameCube, the Switch and PC via a pair of 2.4GHz wireless adapters for GCN and USB. Other extras include a pair of pressure-sensitive triggers (no clicks, though), rumble, rechargeable batteries and a second Z Button.

At first glance, the BattlerGC looks like an alternate take on the Pro Controller, but once held, it feels like a comforting spin on the GameCube's familiar design. The lighter weight, softer triggers and modernized sticks are all immediately noticeable, resulting in a relaxed feel for more, *ahem*, aging hands and sensitive joints. Instead of the small C-Stick, this pad features a full-sized second analog stick, which helps it to seamlessly adapt to modern expectations when used on Switch and PC.

I generously took this controller through its paces with a number of games on all three platforms and encountered overall pleasing results – longer sessions of Double Dash go much easier on the hands, Metroid Prime Remastered played with familiar ease and Pizza Tower felt right at home with the gigantic retro face buttons. Thanks to the subtle updates of traditional triggers and sticks, it honestly feels like a glimpse into an alternate reality where the GameCube controller really did reign supreme.

Only a few minor issues may hold this controller back for some, depending on what you're looking for with a pad like this. Strangely, when used on PC, the ABXY buttons are mapped 1:1 to Xbox's layout, so expect to do some remapping to find the ideal fit. Additionally, while this controller is impressively up to the demanding task of Smash play, the mere presence of a turbo feature unfortunately means it's not exactly street legal, from a competitive sense. Considering Smash diehards are the most ravenous audience here, this minor feature could have been omitted to appeal to that crowd.

Minor issues aside, the BattlerGC has proven quite exemplary over months of use without any signs of unexpected wear. If you're in the market for a new GCN controller, this one makes for a seamless addition to any player's arsenal. **– JOHN-CHARLES**

8.5

WARP ZONE

What Nintendo Power was writing about way back when.

THE MAY 1998 cover of Nintendo Power magazine swung for the fences with Major League Baseball Featuring Ken Griffey Jr. Inside, the bases were loaded with eight pages of Banjo-Kazooie coverage up at bat, along with Forsaken 64, Iggy's Reckin' Balls, Flying Dragon, Offroad Challenge and Quake, which shared this month's poster space with Quest 64. Fielding Game Boy coverage were Bomberman GB, Harvest Moon GB, Brain Drain and Mickey Mouse Magic Wands!

But the starting pitcher for the Game Boy team this month was none other than Pokémon, whose arrival got a full five pages. A large emphasis was placed on the original Gen I adventure, of course, as the NP crew explored its gameplay, the two versions of the game and the trading that could take place between them. But beyond the confines of the Game Boy, they also heralded the coming of the Collectible Card Game (CCG), what we now know to be one of the longest-running animated series of all time and, of course, a glimpse at some of that collectible 'mon merch!

Elsewhere, you'll find the winners of the 1997 Nintendo Power Awards in the stands. It should come as little surprise that GoldenEye 007 nearly swept the awards in every category it was in, only losing the "Coolest Code or Trick" award to Turok: Dinosaur Hunter's "Big Cheat," and to *itself* in the "Coolest Weapon or Item" category, where the Golden Gun beat out the Sniper Rifle for top honors. Harvest Moon won best game for the Super NES over Kirby's Dream Land 3 and The Lost Vikings 2, whereas Donkey Kong Land 3 beat out Ken Griffey Jr. Presents Major League Baseball and Tamagotchi.

This month's Player's Poll grand prize was a grand slam, consisting of four Game Boy Cameras, four Game Boy Printers and, just in case you weren't already playing with Portable Power, four Game Boy Pockets. Finally, Pak Watch went into extra innings with previews of more Star Wars, Turok 2, Mortal Kombat 4 and Gex, plus a peek at E3 1998 and a tease for the upcoming "Color Game Boy."

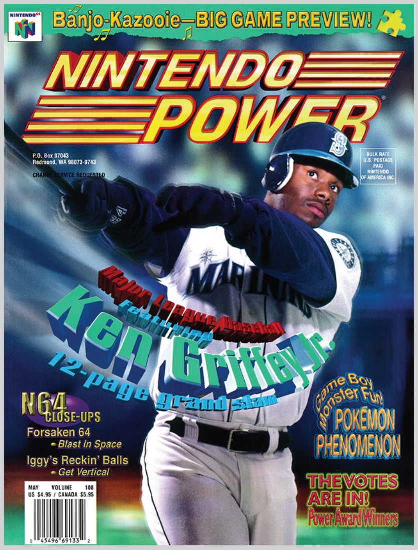
The cover of the June 1998 issue was absolutely un-bear-able, as Banjo-Kazooie GUH-HUH'd their way to the Nintendo 64. Further sweetening the N64 honeypot were World Cup '98 (EA Sports' first official title with their now recently lost FIFA license), Mortal Kombat 4, Bio F.R.E.A.K.S., All-Star Baseball '99, World Grand Prix, Chopper Attack and more Offroad Challenge and Forsaken 64, which shared poster space with WWF War Zone.

Over on the GUH-HUH Boy, we had International Superstar Soccer '98, but the spotlight was mainly shone on the new Game Boy Camera with a special Funtography Contest. Winners in different categories would receive prizes such as a digital camera, a DVD player, a video camera and night vision binoculars. Or, if you were more into sports than making videos, this month's Player's Poll promised courtside tickets to an NBA game with Kobe Bryant as he squared off against the Seattle Sonics, and a copy of NBA Courtside for the N64. Oh, and a trip to Nintendo headquarters, if that's your thing.

A more thorough look at Nintendo's 1998 E3 presence featured Zelda 64, Twelve Tales: Conker 64, Space Station: Silicon Valley, EarthBound 64, Quest 64, Shadowgate, Earthworm Jim 3-D, Turok 2, Lode Runner 64, Mission: Impossible, NBA Jam '99, F-Zero X, Wipeout 64, Pokémon, Pokémon Pikachu, the Game Boy Color and more.

Finally, Pak Watch once again closed us out with glimpses of WCW/nWo Live, Super Mario RPG 2 and the NintendoSports.com website, plus Mr. Miyamoto being inducted into the Academy of Interactive Arts and Sciences Hall of Fame. **— DAVID**

ISSUE #108: **MAY 1998**



ISSUE #109: **JUNE 1998**

NEW WORLDS

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA–OCARINA OF TIME WILL BE THE BIGGEST DRAW AT THIS YEAR'S E3, BUT THERE WILL BE PLENTY OF OTHER PROMISING ADVENTURE AND ROLE-PLAYING GAMES ON DISPLAY OR IN DEVELOPMENT. COME EXPLORE THE EXCITING NEW WORLDS PLANNED FOR YOUR NINTENDO 64.

ZELDA 64

There's little doubt that Nintendo's The Legend of Zelda–Ocarina of Time will be the hottest stop on the E3 floor, so the controllers probably won't have a chance to cool off as attendees line up to check out the game's stunning graphics. Nintendo's legendary EAD team used motion capture scenes to create seamless, realistic animation, especially in battle scenes. Zelda's stunning graphics are especially impressive when the game switches to a first-person perspective, placing a hookshot or a bow and arrow directly in the hands of the player. This latest installment in Link's Hyrulian adventures is Rumble Pak compatible, so gamers will feel the full impact of hand-to-hand combat and use tactile feedback to solve puzzles.

52 NINTENDO POWER

THE MIND BEHIND THE MASTERPIECE

SHIGERU MIYAMOTO MAY BE BEST KNOWN AS THE CREATOR OF MARIO, BUT HE'S ALSO THE MIND BEHIND NINTENDO'S HIGHLY SUCCESSFUL LEGEND OF ZELDA SERIES. RECENTLY, NINTENDO POWER QUIZZED HIM ABOUT THE GAME EVERYONE CONSIDERS TO BE THE MOST ANTICIPATED TITLE OF THE YEAR.

Q: ***We've heard that players will have to collect gems and find something called The Ocarina of Time. How do these items relate to the game's story?***

A: There are three gems in the game called Spiritual Stones. Both the Spiritual Stones and the Ocarina are keys that open the door to a secret and sacred place. Three of the races in Hyrule consider their Spiritual Stone to be a holy item. The Ocarina is the royal family's most secret treasure. Gamers will have to collect all three stones and the Ocarina to reach the sacred place.

Q: ***We saw recent footage of Link in combat. Does the camera have its own AI during the battle or does the player control it?***

A: There is an automatic camera–something I call the Zelda Camera. When you hold the Z Button during battle, a red target will appear so you can pick your opponent. The view remains on the targeted enemy throughout the melee, even if you move around the room. It's both dynamic and realistic.

Q: ***Everything we've seen so far looks expansive. Just how big is the game? How many dungeons, towns and special areas are in the game?***

A: As you have seen in the game's early development, this world will be huge. I won't tell you how many dungeons and towns are in the game yet, but I'll admit that there are six races in Hyrule and each one has its own territory.

TWELVE TALES: CONKER 64

Twelve Tales: Conker 64 has come on in leaps and bounds since it was shown at E3 '97. So much content has been added that it's hard to know where to start: for instance, there are four different ways to play the game.

The single-player game presents three challenges depending on whether you chose to control Conker (action-based, with the squirrel attacking enemies directly) or Berri (strategy-based, nurturing a monster companion and using it to confront enemies). Players can also take control of Conker's owl companion, turning the game into a shoot-'em-up. Then there's the twin player story mode–no arguments about who gets to play this game! Two players can team up on a split-screen display, one controlling Conker and the other controlling the owl.

But the icing on the cake has to be the battle mode for up to four players, where different characters get to fight it out to the last.

Add to that the stunning surround sound, intelligent enemy behavior (with an unprecedented number of enemies on screen), and changing game time–which affects play in a number of ways, like bringing on challenging foes with the onset of night—and you've got enough features to keep you engrossed for a long time. The game even features real time character emotions, which are evolving all the time to provide Conker and friends with a wide range of reactions to their environment. Watch out for Twelve Tales–there's a lot more to it than meets the eye!

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VOLUME 109 53

DATE & PLACE OF BIRTH
January 1978 in Vancouver, Canada

FAVORITE FOOD
The anguished tears of Crypt of the NecroDancer players . . . or, you know, sushi

LITTLE-KNOWN FACTS
I have a degree in microbiology, I'm a Captain Falcon main and I once tried (and failed) to make a hovercraft

CURRENT POSITION IN THE INDUSTRY
Founder and CEO of Brace Yourself Games

BEST KNOWN FOR
Being foolish enough to attempt making a roguelike rhythm game, and being lucky enough to get to work on a Legend of Zelda roguelike rhythm game!

RYAN CLARK

A conversation with the creator (or conductor?) of Crypt of the NecroDancer and Cadence of Hyrule!

INTERVIEW BY JONATHAN HOLMES & MAGGIE JONES LUTEY TRANSCRIPTION BY KRIS RANDAZZO

NF: How did you get into video game development?

RYAN: Like many developers, I played games as a kid. But when I was 6, it was 1984 and there weren't that many games. So when I ran out of games, I would complain to my parents that I was bored. I often complained I was bored! *(laughs)* So eventually my Dad said, "Well, why don't you just make your own games?" And he knew how to program, so he showed me how to get started. So since I was 6, I've been making games for fun as a hobby.

What did you even make games on when you were 6?

With my Apple IIe, using Basic.

What were some of the games that influenced you to make your own, then and now?

The one that was most influential was the original Rogue, the game where the term "roguelike" comes from. I don't think too many people have actually played it, but I played the heck out of it. I've probably put 500 hours into it. And I've never beaten it! It's extremely difficult.

What kept you coming back to it after all those hours?

It's because, unlike something like World of Warcraft where you're often grinding for XP and gold, in a roguelike you're grinding and refining yourself. You're grinding your soul! *(laughs)* And in a true roguelike, there's permadeath. Collecting gold and XP for the long run is impossible, so the only way to make gains is to actually figure out the game and improve.

Also, the procedurally generated nature of roguelikes makes them games of chance. Each time you play is like pulling the handle on a slot machine. You get a quick hit of adrenaline before you find out if your starting loot will be better, or if you won't have to fight that troll that killed you last time. Every run feels full of possibility.

The downside, though, is it's not always fair. A lot of runs might feel unwinnable by the end. You may not know how you could have avoided death. You may not have learned anything. You may have just encountered a monster that was too high level for what you had, and there was no way out!

With NecroDancer, I wanted to make a roguelike that was fair. Where skill is the main factor. I looked to Spelunky, a roguelike that really innovated at making the genre more fair, and thought it was the real-time nature of the play that helped it to be more about skill. But for my game, I didn't want to lose Rogue's turn-based heart. I thought the way to split the difference could be to do really fast turns. Then you'd have to think quickly, so skill would be a factor, but without turning into a straight action game.

To do that, I tried setting a time limit, so you had to move like every second. And moving once a second sort of felt like moving to a beat. That led me to try putting the game to music. Michael Jackson's Thriller was actually the first song that I ever played the game to. It just felt right, with the zombies and spooky stuff, for a game about going into a crypt. And it was super fun right away, almost by accident! I was trying to make roguelikes better, and in the process, I came up with the rhythm roguelike genre.

Did you ever talk to Michael Jackson's people about actually licensing that song? That wouldn't even be the most surprising crossover you've been a part of . . .

I have not, but it would be cool.

Was it this urge to explore what's possible, even when there's a lot of risk involved, that led you to start your own company?

Before Crypt of the NecroDancer, I co-founded a different company called Grubby Games. It was so hard to get attention for your games then. Consoles weren't really an option, and Steam was barely in existence, so all we could do is sell our game on our own website, then talk to people on the Internet to try to convince them to come to our site and buy it.

I remember Boing Boing, the old tech blog, actually covered our game because we sent them a code for it, and we got like $10,000 in sales that day. Before that, we did not make $10,000 a day! *(laughs)* So compared to that experience, launching Crypt of the NecroDancer with a new company in 2014 felt much less risky.

But selling people a rhythm game still isn't easy. You really have to play them to understand them. How did you get people to give your game a try?

I think we lucked out that NecroDancer was a very good show game. There was a nine-month period before we launched where we took the game to 10 shows. We brought it to Europe, Japan, the States, Canada . . . and always with a Dance Dance Revolution dance pad. When people saw this retro-looking, traditional dungeon crawling game that you can play with your feet, it would always draw a crowd. You'd hear them asking, "How does this game work? Is it fun?" Then once they actually played it at home on a keyboard, I'm grateful that a lot of them said, "This is actually good, even without the dance pad gimmick." But of course, not everyone said that. And that's OK. I always talk about how when you're making games, it's important that you get some people extremely excited, more so than making something that's just passable that doesn't leave an impression. Because someone who doesn't care about your game is almost the same as someone who hates it: Both aren't going to buy your game.

But it definitely feels worse when people hate your game, and when you mix two genres together, that's bound to happen. Someone who's a fan of one of your genres and not the other could walk away disappointed. But if you find the people who are fans of both your genres, which in this case is roguelikes and rhythm games, they're going to be like, "Holy cow, is this real? This is perfect for me!" And that feeling of positivity is contagious, especially when playing with friends.

That strategy led to you working with Nintendo on Cadence of Hyrule, an official crossover between Crypt of the NecroDancer and the Legend of Zelda series, a franchise with a massive, highly opinionated fanbase. How have things changed for you and your team in the years since Cadence was released?

It put us on the map in a whole new way; brought us a whole new level of legitimacy as a company. Potential collaborators who probably wouldn't have considered working with us before are way more likely to talk to us now. And, of course, it broadened our fanbase in a lot of ways as well. But most important to us as developers, it was just an amazing thing that we got to do. A real dream come true. So yeah, it's been big.

BRACE YOURSELF GAMES BECAME THE FIRST (AND SO FAR, ONLY) INDIE STUDIO TO GET TO OFFICIALLY COLLABORATE WITH NINTENDO WHEN THEY WERE ENTRUSTED WITH THE ZELDA BRAND AND LAUNCHED THE CROSSOVER GAME "CADENCE OF HYRULE" IN 2019.

Has it been hard to figure out how to follow that up?
I think people don't really expect us to follow that up. I think they're thinking, "That's a crazy thing that happened and will probably never happen again." And that's how we see it too. When it comes to following ourselves up, the only expectation we put on ourselves is to work on games we're passionate about. We're the makers of Crypt of the NecroDancer, but we also made Industries of Titan, a sci-fi city builder/infantry brigade tactics game. That's actually why there was kind of a large gap between the first DLC for NecroDancer and Synchrony, the second one that we're just launching now. If we just worked on the same game all the time, even if it's our most popular franchise, that wouldn't be too exciting.

So why come back to NecroDancer now, with both the Synchrony DLC (currently in Early Access on Steam) and with Rift of the NecroDancer, a totally new spin-off game?
Because we're excited about it again! *(laughs)* If you take a break for a few years, and go to shows like PAX and see people asking for more of your older games, it inspires you.

The origin of Synchrony actually comes straight from the fans – there's a community that's been racing in Crypt of the NecroDancer competitively on Twitch since it launched. Some of them reverse-engineered the game and came up with a mod to give it online multiplayer. We saw that, we were amazed, and we asked them if they wanted to make it official DLC. They said yes, and here we are.

What's that process been like?
They're amazing. Extremely fast working and always receptive to new ideas. And there are a lot of new ideas! We didn't want multiplayer to be like "easy mode" where one skilled player does all the work while the others just watch, or worse, just keep dying. So we designed new enemies specifically to prevent that, like a huge Golem that both players have to hit at the same time in order to damage it, or the Blade Master that one player has to attack to get it to dodge backwards into another player waiting to strike. The new enemies require you to communicate, make a plan and work together.

We've also added three new characters that totally change the game. Klarinetta has a huge sword that you swing by turning around, and Chaunter is a spirit who takes over enemies' bodies. So if you've played the base game and were killed by the fire-breathing Red Dragon, now you can *be* that Red Dragon and go and smash other enemies with it!

The last is Suzu, who has an invincible dash that can kill enemies in one hit – but she might dash farther than you can see on the screen, and could end up surrounded by enemies in a bad way. So, with practice, you can blaze through stages and kill bosses with one hit, but only if you line everything up perfectly. She adds a whole new level of depth, specially designed for speedrunners.

Did Rift come from a similar place of inspiration?
Rift came partly from hearing from people who play Crypt and like it, but don't love it, because they want more variety in their rhythm games. In NecroDancer, you always move on the beat. Every beat. It stays pretty much the same. In other rhythm games, you sometimes go double time, or skip beats, or otherwise change things up while staying on time.

We wanted to try that with Rift, while keeping NecroDancer's spirit of strategy to it. There's a part of Rift that's like Dance Dance Revolution or Guitar Hero, but instead of sheet music or instructions for your feet coming at you, it's enemies with behaviors you have to anticipate and plan around. First it's green slimes that die in one hit. Then it's blue slimes with more HP that you have to hit on consecutive beats, like a one-two punch. Then there's bats that move from one track to the other, and zombies that come at you from an angle, sort of sneaking up on you. And none of this is explained. You have to look and learn what the enemies do, then prepare for what's coming, all while working though the beat in the moment.

We've got another mode that's like rhythm Punch-Out!!. I loved that game as a kid, and always felt like it was like a rhythm game without music. So, we said, "Why not add music?" And it's really satisfying, having musical battles, watching for tells and then responding with dodges and attacks all on the beat.

And there's minigames inspired by Rhythm Heaven as well, but with NecroDancer-style strategy added in where it works. It's a lot! *(laughs)*

So sometimes it's like if you played an instrument and the sheet music came to life and attacked you, and other times it's like playing in a band and being in a boxing match at the same time?
Wouldn't that be fun? *(laughs)*

That begs the question, as someone who has already gotten to work on a dream project with a Nintendo series in real life, is there another series from Nintendo that would still be fun to work on? Any other dreams still left to make a reality?
Am I immune to this question? Like you said, I can't say I want to work on my dream game with Nintendo, since it's a game we already worked on. But I can say that I'm a huge fan of Smash Bros. We play it at our office all the time. So, I would love to make a fighting game, like my own version of Smash Bros. That's not a super intelligent answer, just a fanboy answer. And it would be stupidly hard, but I'm up for the challenge!

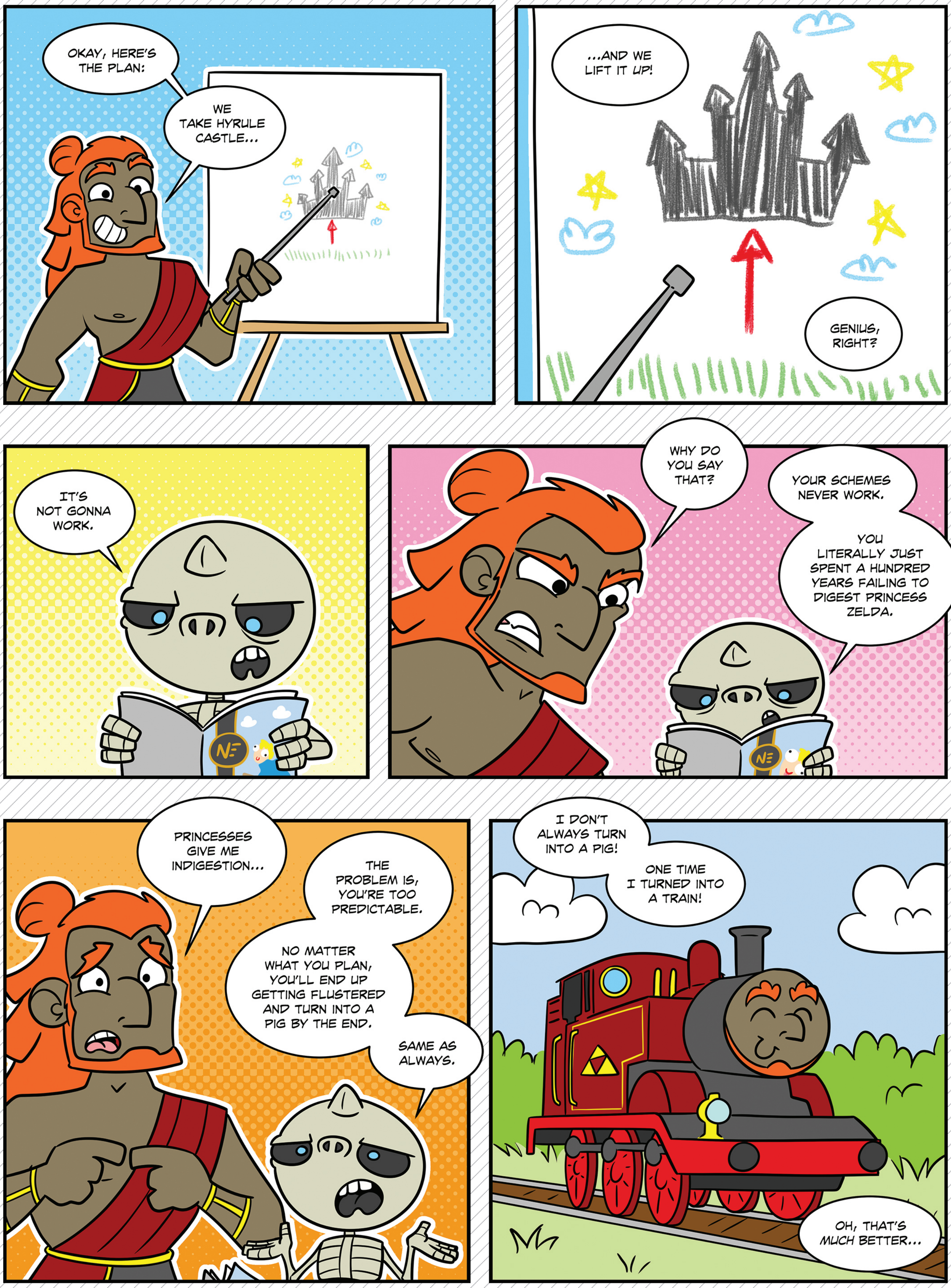
And something along those same lines, but sort of the opposite direction: I've heard a lot of people say that the original Crypt of the NecroDancer could have been made for the NES. And there actually are companies that make demakes of modern games on real NES cartridges. So we may be doing that in the future, because there's nothing that happens in NecroDancer that would have been totally impossible to do back in the 8-bit era.

Well, the NES did have foot control with the Power Pad, if you wanted to go even more dance retro than DDR!

And now our last question, as always: If you could have any superpower, what would it be and why?
Doesn't everyone just say they want to be omnipotent? Like Q from Star Trek? That's all the superpowers, isn't it? If you want to be invisible, you can be invisible. If you want to see the future, you can just see it. Isn't that the obvious answer?

And he's a relatively happy guy too.
Yeah, he seems pretty happy with himself. Other people, not so much. *(laughs)* NF

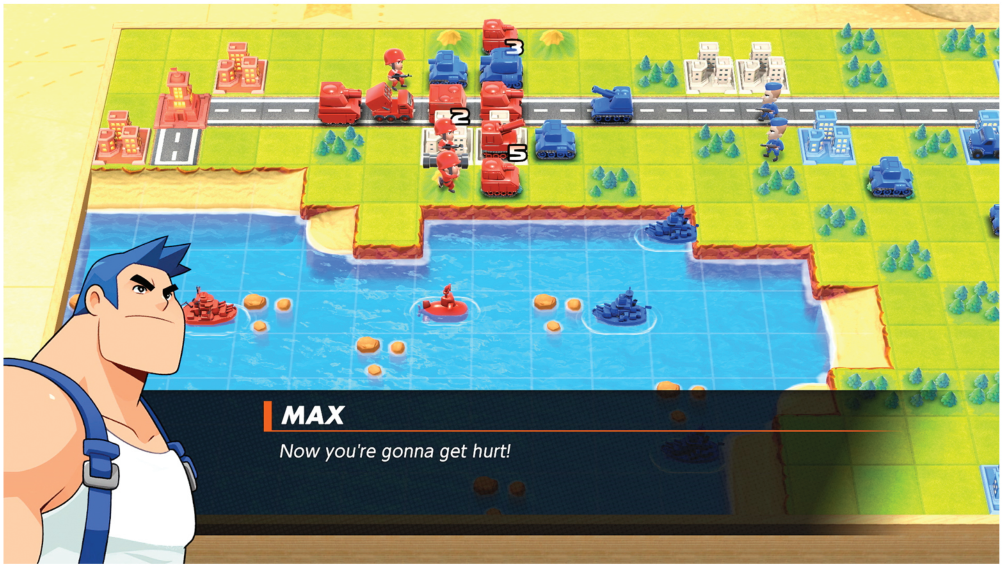
HAVING CONCLUDED HER QUEST IN HYRULE, CRYPT OF THE NECRODANCER'S HERO CADENCE IS GETTING READY FOR HER NEXT JOURNEY. "RIFT OF THE NECRODANCER" WILL PRESENT SEVERAL DIFFERENT RHYTHM CHALLENGES, LIKE FIGHTS INSPIRED BY PUNCH-OUT!!



BY MATTHEW LOFFHAGEN

REVIEWS

After enduring multiple delays that pushed its debut back from December 2021 to April 2022 to, finally, April 2023, the long-awaited revamp of Advance Wars has finally arrived! It's finally time to flex your mental muscles with its tactical challenges. So flip the page to read our full review of the all-new Re-Boot Camp!



SWITCH PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: WAYFORWARD
RATING: E10+

Battles of Land, Sea and Sky

ADVANCE WARS 1+2: RE-BOOT CAMP

THESE WARS WERE worth the wait!

Advance Wars 1+2: Re-Boot Camp has had a lot of trouble getting itself deployed. Originally set to launch in December 2021, it got delayed at the last minute because it apparently needed a bit more development time. So it got bumped to April 2022. As that month drew closer, though, actual war broke out in Ukraine, meaning a new war-themed video game hitting the market at that moment would have been in poor taste. So Nintendo kicked it off the release schedule entirely for the better part of the following year. At last, after an incredibly lengthy wait for a game that was essentially ready to roll a year and a half ago, it's here.

Re-Boot Camp finally opened up and began accepting new recruits on April 21, 2023 – and longtime Wars series fans like myself got to re-enlist as veteran commanders! It's been great to finally get to dive back into this world, especially since, before this, the Wars franchise hadn't gotten a new installment since the DS days.

"Re-Boot Camp" might be a bit of a misleading name, though. As great as the pun is, this game is in no way a reboot – rather, it's a total presentation overhaul of the two Advance Wars titles from the Game Boy Advance era, introducing new visuals and music but leaving the gameplay almost entirely untouched. All the maps and missions are the same. All the units behave in the same way they did decades ago. All the Commanding Officer characters have the same strengths, weaknesses and special abilities. Calling something a "reboot" usually means it's building new ideas on top of an old foundation. That isn't this. This is a visual revamp, plus an audio overhaul.

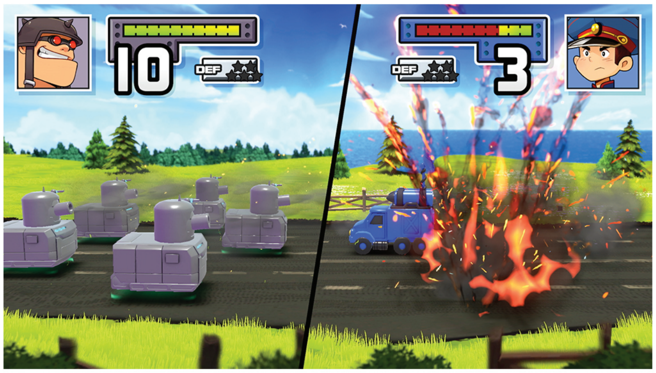
Happily, all of the redone elements of the presentation are top-notch! The original spritework and soundtrack in the GBA generation remain timeless, and I'm sure I'll go back to play those versions in the future, even though this release now exists. But even still, the fresh coat of paint WayForward has applied here really pops.

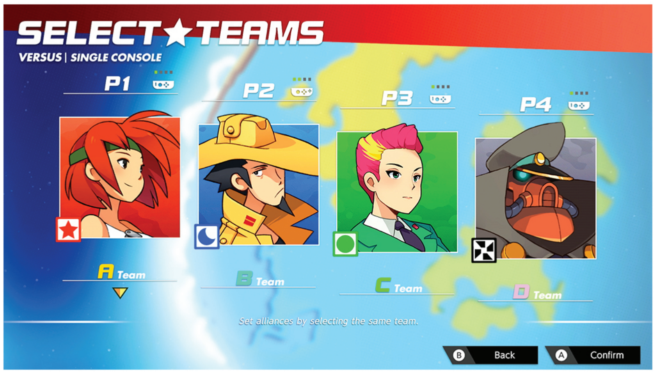
The battlefields have swapped out their old sprites for fully polygonal models of every unit and piece of the environment, and every setting now looks like it's a tabletop wargame, complete with a wooden frame surrounding the outer edges of the map. That touch is perfect – it makes it feel like Advance Wars now fits alongside the likes of Clubhouse Games and the way that series' most recent release, 51 Worldwide Classics, presented its array of venerable board games. The tactical turn-based strategy of the Wars series is a lot like a more complicated version of chess, so it's even more appropriate to make it look like all this action is playing out across a tangible game board.

I also like how it contextualizes the battlefields having edges at all. It never made practical sense before why, for example, a flying unit couldn't zip around the outside of the set land limits and swoop back in to flank its foes. Here, it's like a chessboard! It makes more sense to my brain.

Alongside the action being reimagined to look like toy soldiers battling it out, the visuals for the CO characters have also been remade. Now replacing the sprites from the old games is the same kind of high-definition cartoon style we've previously seen in titles like Shantae and the Seven Sirens. (Actually, I went back and watched some of that most recent Shantae sequel's dialogue scenes, and the Advance Wars characters have been given more animation – this is a new high point for WayForward in this area. Though Vitamin Connection comes close!) Anyway, it's great, as the COs are full of expressive emotion both in conversation and in the midst of battles, when their faces appear in the upper corners of the screen to react to what's happening below.

But the best new piece of the presentation – the absolute show-stopper – is the all-new soundtrack. It rocks!





Again, the music of these games back on the GBA was already stunning – but WayForward's musicians have taken that spectacular source material and cranked its intensity up to another level! Every classic theme has been remixed, often with multiple different versions. Different spins on the same song dynamically shift back and forth into and out of one another as you navigate menus or call up Intel info in the middle of a battle. Then the music and the new HD cartoon CO animation work together when a CO Power is activated, as a quick cutscene sweeps the new reality of the battle into existence.

Along with bits of voice acting! The characters all get to audibly speak for the first time ever . . . if only a little bit. That's an area where WayForward seems to have held back from going totally hog wild, as instead of having every spoken sentence reflected in the audible dialogue, only a few pieces here and there are actually voiced. That's a shame. It's not like there's a metric ton of text – I wouldn't think full voice acting would have been too impossible to implement.

OK, enough presentation talk! That is mostly what fuels this two-games-in-one re-release, and it's what old players of the original versions are likely most interested in, but I must recognize all the newcomers in the crowd as well. So let me go over the gameplay too!

As I said earlier, playing Advance Wars is a lot like playing chess. You have a bunch of different kinds of "pieces" on this game board, and they all have unique rules for how they can move and how they can attack. Basic infantry soldiers can move three tiles in one turn, and can capture cities, bases and even the enemy's HQ to win the battle – but they're weak in fights. Mech units are soldiers that pack a bit more punch since they carry heavier weaponry – but that also slows them down a bit, so they can only move two spaces at a time. Tanks are mightier still, but can't maneuver over mountains . . . and so on and so forth. Land units, flying units, different kinds of boats – all of them have their own strengths and weaknesses, and it's up to you to outsmart your opponent by using the forces you have to work with, along with each map's terrain, to get the drop on them and destroy all their troops before they can do the same to you.

There's so much depth here! There are two main campaigns filled with unique combat scenarios, all strung together with an anime-appropriate storyline that builds up to great climax moments at the ends of both games. It'll take you 30-ish hours if you blitz through the story, but even beyond that, there's a ton more to do. The War Room mode is filled with dozens upon dozens of more unique maps to test your tactical skills even further. There are more maps and more ways to play them in the Versus mode, which is where local multiplayer happens – by either linking up wirelessly with other Switch systems in close proximity, or by playing "pass the Switch" with a single machine. There's a mode where you can design your own maps from scratch, so you could conceivably have a limitless supply of new battlefields!

It's really a packed package here, offering a ton of value for returning fans and new players alike. The only option that feels a little lacking is the Online mode – it only allows you to play one-on-one matches, and only against people you have registered as Friends on your system.

I understand why this call was made, since playing through a whole round of Advance Wars can take a long time – if Nintendo allowed random matchmaking with strangers, surely the vast majority of games would end in disconnects after 45 minutes or so. You kind of need your online opponent to be someone you know so that they won't ragequit anytime you snipe their best tank with a hidden rocket truck. But given that this game did have over a year of extra time to simmer before finally being served to hungry fans, couldn't some other Online option have been cooked up?

Maybe that would've been too far outside the scope of this project. This game was clearly intended to just get Advance Wars back on the map – not to totally overhaul and/or expand it. Maybe, if this one does well enough, WayForward will be allowed to stay in this world and make an all-new sequel next? I think they deserve the chance!
– LUCAS

9.5

Enter the Internet!

MEGA MAN BATTLE NETWORK LEGACY COLLECTION

CAPCOM'S LATEST COLLECTION rounds up the six entries in the Mega Man Battle Network role-playing series that ran on the Game Boy Advance from 2001 to 2006. However, it's worth noting that of those six, four came in Pokémon-style dual-version releases – so from MMBN3 through 6, there are two versions each, comprising a total of 10 games altogether.

More astute fans of the series might point out that the first and fifth entries also had Nintendo DS releases, but unfortunately, neither they nor any of the enhancements or changes they brought are included here. It's GBA or bust.

Those intimidated by the prospect of a Mega Man RPG – on top all the various other series and spin-offs made through the years – need not worry about needing to know all of that before diving in here. Battle Network takes place in its own continuity timeline of the Mega Man Multiverse (and Star Force comes after it, but that's for another time), and while it does have its own spin-offs of various types, genres and platforms, one can consider those more akin to bonus material to the full experience provided here.

The games are, for the most part, unchanged from what you know. There are some enhancements to the title screens and the text font (though the latter being an "enhancement" seems to be up for debate), and a few minor changes here and there (SpoutMan becoming AquaMan again in BN6), but most of the typos, memes and cringe moments remain, even warranting a warning screen about inclusivity from Capcom upon startup.

Beyond the host of bonuses like art, music and trophies one expects from a collection like this by now, other enhancements include a "Buster MAX" mode for all games, which powers your normal Mega Buster up times 100, making most of the minor enemies trivial nuisances. You can also further up the ante in certain games with various special chips and cards that were originally only available through special promotions in Japan.

Unfortunately, a lot of the accoutrements we've grown used to in these collections are absent. No Quick Save. No Rewind. Only one save file per game, and no CRT filter. If you're like me, the absence of some of these can make fighting final bosses feel like a bit of a chore.

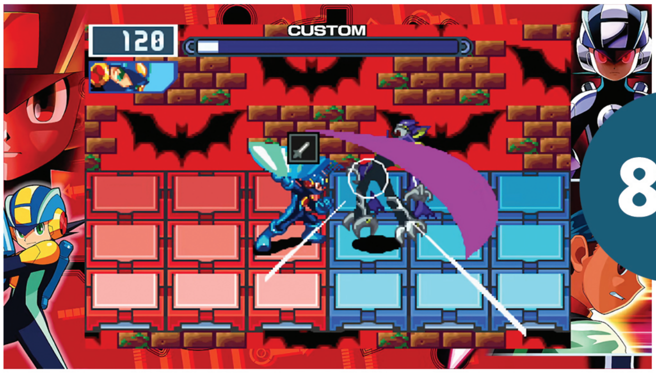
While previous collections endeavoured to provide bonus modes and challenges for players, the developers of MMBNLC have taken a different tack by instead focusing on the multiplayer aspects of the original games and bringing them online for a new generation – as is only fitting for a series based around competing against other NetBattlers in the Cyberworld. Now you can NetBattle or trade Battle Chips with friends and rivals from around the world, as well as locally.

But the online NetBattling part of the experience is a little lacking. Each game has its own online functionality, and it seems that players are bound to gravitate more towards some titles than others, as I had no trouble connecting with an opponent in some, while others were virtual ghost towns.

Moreover, even in the games where you do connect with someone, the results can range anywhere from "smooth" to "passable," all in the same match. My experience never reached unplayable levels – no doubt thanks in some small part to the limited grid-based movement mechanics that are a core of the game – but there was still some pretty noticeable lag going on at times, with MegaMan moving a second after I pressed a direction or action on the controller.

All in all, MMBNLC is the best way to play these games today, especially with the Wii U eShop now out of business. Even notwithstanding that, it's a fair bit cheaper to get all the games in one bundle here, though the individual pricing is a little lopsided. (Volume 1 has four games to Volume 2's six, but both are priced the same.) Go for the full bundle, and relive the glory days when the idea of kitchen appliances connected to the Internet and computers that fit in your pocket felt like the most outrageous kind of science fiction. **– DAVID**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: CAPCOM RATING: E10+



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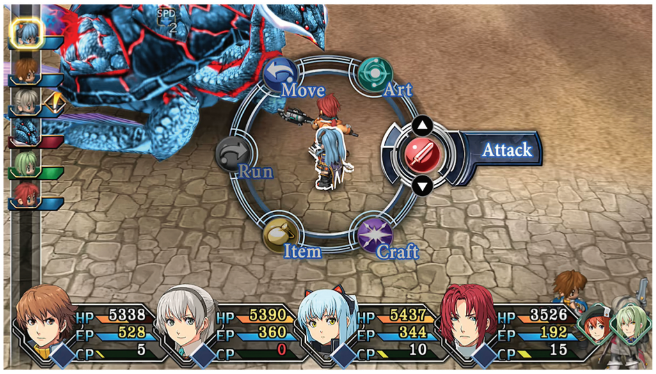

The Crossbell Chronicle Continues

THE LEGEND OF HEROES: TRAILS TO AZURE

WHEN THE FIRST entry of a series is so good, its sequel has a lot to live up to. It has to provide a similar experience, but also build upon the strong foundation set before it. For a worthy example of this, look no further than Trails to Azure.

This Nihon Falcom JRPG is the sequel to Trails from Zero and the final game in the Trails series' Crossbell arc. It delivers a satisfying follow-up by expanding on gameplay mechanics and weaving a story that takes what Zero established and uses it to set the stage for a juicy political thriller.

It's best to play Trails from Zero before Trails to Azure, so you can get the full picture. There will be minor spoilers for Zero past this point.

Trails to Azure picks up after the conclusion of Zero, which ended with our heroes in the Crossbell Police Department's Special Support Section resolving an incident with a cult that threatened the city.

The story of Trails to Azure takes a few chapters to get going, but once it does, it's a wild ride. Protagonist Lloyd Bannings and co. learn that the cult was only the tip of the iceberg – more shady organizations are using the region of Crossbell for their own personal gain. They have a lot of new enemies, from a violent band of hired mercenaries to the secret society of Ouroboros.

Couple that with a political conspiracy full of betrayals that left my jaw on the floor, and you have one of the best stories Trails has told to date! One of the greatest strengths of the Crossbell games is that they unfold as a sprawling mystery, and it's so fulfilling when you see how all the clues line up together.

Azure also takes the combat system from Zero and immediately adds more variety. The Trails series utilizes the turn-based AT Battle System, where you manipulate turn order to gain advantages, and characters use unique moves called Elemental Arts and Crafts to take out foes.

Azure is the first game in the Trails series to feature Master Quartz – these items provide significant stat boosts and get stronger as they level up alongside the characters. Also, the SSS adds two new members, Noel Seeker and Wazy Hemisphere, who offer their own helpful abilities.

Another notable addition is the Burst feature. At certain points in the story, the SSS can fill up the Burst Gauge in battles. When activated, it moves them to the top of the turn order for several turns.

These new offerings, especially Burst, came in handy, as Azure has some of the toughest boss battles I've experienced in the series. While playing on the game's Hard difficulty, I had to diligently plan out builds, items and equipment. As tough as they were, the fights weren't impossible with the right strategy, and it made getting a win that much more satisfying!

As with Zero's port, Azure looks beautiful and performs excellently on Switch in TV and Handheld Modes. It came with additional features at launch, including a setting that shows the names of music tracks as they play during the game.

The new official localizations of Zero and Azure provide the missing piece of the Trails series fans have been wanting for over a decade. With their ambitious story, solid gameplay and immaculate presentation on Switch, the Crossbell games were most definitely worth the wait!

With both halves of the two-part Crossbell saga now available, it's a great time to jump in and try out Trails if you never have. Especially since the series is still expanding – another new installment, Trails into Reverie, is due to debut on the Switch soon. We'll do a preview for it next time! **— MAGGIE**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NIS AMERICA
DEVELOPER: NIHON FALCOM
RATING: T

10

Another Excellent Encore

KIRBY'S RETURN TO DREAM LAND DELUXE

NOBODY CAN SAY that Nintendo didn't go all-out to celebrate Kirby's 30th anniversary!

While many of the Big N's biggest brands have passed by big birthdays in the past without even a whisper of acknowledgement from the company, Kirby turning 30 has been treated with absolute reverence.

It began with the release of Kirby and the Forgotten Land on March 25 last year — just one month ahead of his official 30th birthday of April 27. (That being the day when, in 1992, Kirby's Dream Land first went on sale in Japan.) That original adventure got a new encore when Game Boy games were added to the Nintendo Switch Online service this past February, and other Kirby classics made newly available for NSO subscribers to play in the last year include Kirby's Dream Land 2, Kirby's Avalanche and Kirby's Super Star Stacker (on the Japanese version of the NSO SNES app). He also got a brand-new eShop-exclusive release in Kirby's Dream Buffet. Finally, bookending what has arguably been Kirby's largest single year of releases ever is Kirby's Return to Dream Land Deluxe. And what a grand finale this is for his 12-month-long jubilee!

This game is a beautified revamp of 2011's original Return to Dream Land, a late-generation Wii release that I personally think was the best couch co-op four-player platformer of that entire era. (Sorry, New Super Mario Bros. Wii.) It felt fresh and fun thanks in part to the fact that every player had their own unique set of abilities. Whereas Mario, Luigi and their tag-along pair of nameless Toads all ran, jumped and controlled entirely alike in NSMB Wii, Return to Dream Land offered gamers the option of being the heavy-hammering King Dedede, the spear-wielding Bandana Waddle Dee, the sword-slashing Meta Knight or the most versatile of all, Kirby himself, with his ability to suck up enemies and copy their powers. That made for very varied multiplayer fun, and added an extra measure of replay value — you could run through the quest as one of the bunch, then go back and do it all over again with one of the other three options if you wanted to. A wonderful game design all-around!

So it's no wonder why they'd want to revisit it now! KRTDL Deluxe brings that great multiplayer dynamic back, but expands upon it in every area.

There are more options for multiplayer now, as anyone can now choose to be Kirby (avoiding any fighting over the Player 1 position and allowing all participants to copy enemy powers). It has a wide selection of unlockable masks that any character can wear — you can charge into battle against Whispy Woods as Dedede pretending to be, say, Queen Sectonia from Kirby Triple Deluxe. There's the main quest to tackle, but also an "Extra" mode that bumps up the difficulty with tougher foes to face and less health for the heroes. Lots of choices here!

So many choices, in fact, that my eyes would sometimes glaze over at the chaos unfolding on the screen in front of me. My small army of sons were only too happy to put the four-player co-op to the test, but with each of them being a different character, and all of them wearing different masks representing four *other* Kirby series characters (and their style of play being so erratic), it was a bit of a sensory overload from time to time.

I let them run wild together on one save file, then started a fresh one for a solo run for myself — and I appreciate that the game can be fully enjoyed with either approach. Return to Dream Land can be a mixed-up multiplayer mess, a rewarding one-player journey . . . or a happy medium somewhere between those two extremes!

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: HAL LABORATORY
RATING: E10+

One thing that confuses me in this re-release is its handling of the main mode's minigames. Back on the Wii, you'd unlock access to set-apart diversions like Ninja Dojo (a throwing star target challenge) by finding Energy Spheres in the main campaign, which then activated a door within the Lor Starcutter (a ship that serves as the hub for the quest). That same method of unlocking access returns here . . . but it's kind of useless? Because all of the minigames are already accessible from the start by just choosing to go to "Merry Magoland" from the main menu. It's a whole new theme park-themed destination full of doors to enter that let you play any minigame you like – so why should I be excited when I collect "X" number of Energy Spheres and the very same minigame is then "unlocked?" It wasn't locked to begin with!

The levels are a little too long for my liking. A typical level will have a lot of hopping, bopping and inhaling bad guys through several sidescrolling sections, then you'll come across a special foe that grants Kirby a mega-charged super version of one of his Copy Abilities, like a gigantic sword that slices the whole screen. You'll then run through a time-limited "final" stretch of the stage, unleashing your fully powered-up fury, after which you will inevitably find a glowing portal. Then you jump into that and are swept away to yet another kind of challenge: outrunning an ever-advancing wall of instant-kill energy while navigating through a dozen obstacles or so. After *that*, a mini-boss fight! Finally, when that foe is felled, you earn the last two Energy Spheres of the stage (which, again, don't really unlock any minigames), and you're flung back to the portal, which is always placed mere steps away from the actual final door that officially completes the stage.

Phew! That's a lot!

Maybe that's just 2011-era level design showing its age, though, as I did quite enjoy the snappier stages in the new Magolor's Epilogue mode. It's a brand-new bonus adventure that casts you as a defeated, depowered little wizard on a quest to regain his magical might. It's got an interesting method of character growth, as you gather power over time but can then choose how to allocate it. Would you rather jump higher, or fire stronger projectiles? Add extra HP to your health meter, or give your shield a boost for better blocking? It's fresh, and it makes me wish HAL would give us more adventures like this where Kirby is not the main character.

But I'm not trying to get rid of you, Kirby! I may just be a little Kirbyed out after this jam-packed past year. If you still have an appetite and want one more slice of 30th birthday cake, though, feel free to indulge here – Return to Dream Land Deluxe is, on the whole, excellent!

– LUCAS

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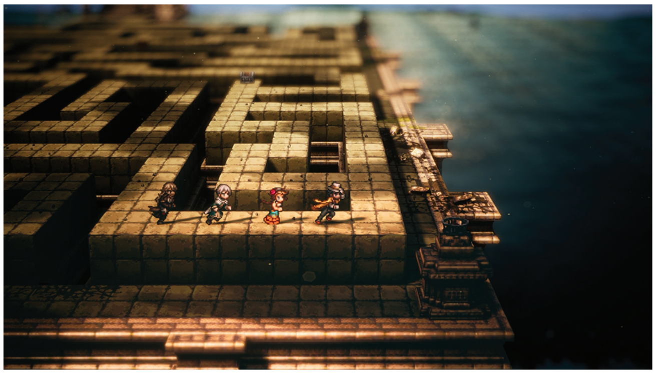
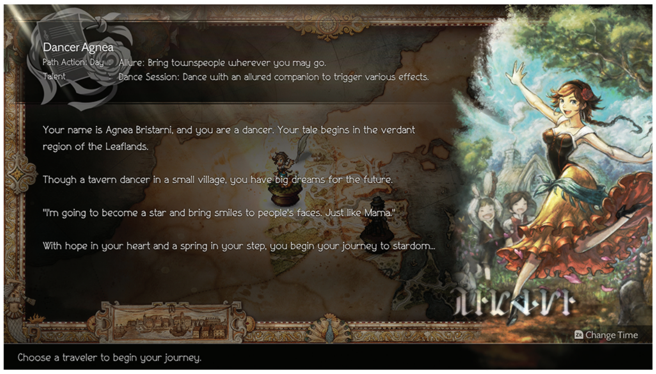




An Even More Excellent Adventure

OCTOPATH TRAVELER II

OCTOPATH TRAVELER WAS one of *the* best games of 2018, and no wonder – it had memorable characters and stories, an old-school graphic style given new life in the new-school era, wonderfully scored music and a challenging job and battle system. The only thing lacking, according to many players and reviewers, was a sense of camaraderie between the members of the ensemble cast. Nearly five years later, Octopath Traveler II is here to set things right.

If you haven't played the original, you won't be missing out on much, and I appreciated that. However, a lot of this sequel's character stories felt to me like rehashes of the stories from that first game, with some "new and improved" bits thrown in, such as Hikari's struggle against his inner self as he tries to reunite his battle comrades and restore his kingdom. Agnea's story, to me, felt way too similar to Tressa's, while Throné's starts out very similar to Primrose's before veering off the rails and venturing into *super* creepy territory. Osvald's story was my first indication that I wouldn't be seeing the same story structure recycled from the original, and he was overall one of the more interesting characters. Partitio was a huge goofball (with his Western accent the perfect fit), and you can't help but root for him and his grand schemes. Castti's struggle to recover her memory was an emotional journey, and I liked how her Inquire Path Action "glitched" when she was trying to remember information. Ochette was the only character and background that truly felt original to me – a Beastling whose motives were selfless and based on protecting her homeland. Finally, Temenos – whose personality reminds me of a young Miles Edgeworth behind the prosecutor's bench – ended up being my favorite of the main cast. If I hadn't played the original, I'd probably have appreciated Hikari, Agnea and Throné more.

As for the heavily promoted feature "Crossed Paths," there are only four of them, and they come into play after the first half and the final chapter for each character involved, bookending their journey. It's interesting to see unlikely pairs of characters – Temenos and Throné bantering with each other as they investigate a mystery of the church, Hikari and Agnea and their appreciation of traditional music, Castti and Ochette investigating a mysterious phenomenon in the forest and Partitio and Osvald butting heads over how they take their coffee while helping a budding astronomer. However, unlike the original, they are the setup for a grand finale – a final sequence in which all eight characters come together for a final quest, with the fate of Solistia in their hands. It's a shame that we couldn't get more Crossed Paths – even optional ones – but it's understandable in the context of the story structure. Travel Banter's entertaining, but it doesn't beat fully voice-acted cutscenes.

Regarding the battle and job system: It's better than ever. The addition of the Latent Power mechanic makes for some unique moves and strategies, especially with the right combination of powers and moves – being able to extend Agnea's dances to the entire party is a huge boon, Castti's powered-up Concoct is light years ahead of Alfyn's from the original, and I put Temenos and Throné in my party and switched to night before difficult boss battles for an advantage. There's also a unique new job class – Inventor – that unlocks very close to the beginning, and requires collecting items to unlock attacks and buffs, such as a multi-target catapult. (Also, you get to wear steampunk gear!) The day/night system is also a great new implementation, but to be honest, I would have liked to see a bigger variety of actions than just the standard four and their variations.

After seeing 2022's LIVE A LIVE's interpretation of the HD-2D art style, I was eagerly awaiting how Octopath's sequel would improve on what was

already a uniquely stylistic game – and I was not disappointed. I'll miss the sparkling sand, snow and water from the original, but seeing all the little background details is amazing – rainbows shining in misty waterfalls, hot air shimmering in the desert, fireflies glowing in twilit Toto'haha. The enemies have also undergone an upgrade, with more fluid and detailed attack animations – and not just the bosses, either. If there's one area where I don't like the way it looks, it would have to be the world map when you're on your boat. The artists recreated the world map in a smaller scale, and while it works, it looks out of proportion compared to your ship, and it felt like something out of the original NES Final Fantasy – very basic. I think it would've looked and felt a lot better if they tried to recreate the Mode 7 graphics used for the airship and chocobo rides in Final Fantasy VI.

Matthew has a lot to say about the soundtrack, but I wanted to put my two leaves here as well. There are a lot of nods to the original's soundtrack that I really loved – specifically one track that plays during the first part of Ochette's story, and the background music for the city of Flamechurch – but I also loved how the day and night tracks flowed into each other when you switched the time. My favorite character themes were those of Temenos – which sounds like a film noir detective show theme song – and Partitio, which reminded me of a sitcom opening theme song and stands out in contrast to the American Old West atmosphere of Oresrush.

If you're looking for an RPG with an extensive story to get lost in and lots of secrets to discover, Octopath Traveler II gets my recommendation, even if you've never played the original. **– REBECCA**

8.5

SWITCH PUBLISHER: SQUARE ENIX DEVELOPERS: SQUARE ENIX & ACQUIRE RATING: T

SECOND OPINION SOUNDTRACK ANALYSIS!

AS A HUGE fan of the original Octopath Traveler's music, I jumped at the chance to write about the latest soundtrack in the series.

Octopath Traveler II raises the stakes by incorporating a whopping 131 tracks filling a six-CD soundtrack, as well as including an entire second orchestra for select tunes. As this is 50% bigger than the prior game's tracklist, most of the bulking up comes from the emphasis on day-night mechanics. To that end, every field theme and town theme in the game has a "night" version focusing on strings, piano and female vocals.

One cool feature that was also present in the original is the use of character motifs incorporated into boss battles. Each of the eight travelers has their own theme that you'll hear at points during their stories, but there's also a driving version of each theme that plays before that character fights one of their chapter bosses. Each of these preludes is written with the tempo and key of the boss music in mind, so that once the fight starts, the music seamlessly transitions into one of three boss themes.

And Octopath II takes this even further *(SPOILER WARNING for the rest of this paragraph, by the way!)* by incorporating each character's theme into the final chapter boss song itself! Which means you're essentially getting *eight* unique versions of that song, making each encounter deliver something new to look forward to.

From the quality and depth of the instruments featured to the richness of the compositions, both Octopath Traveler OSTs are among my all-time favorites in gaming. As a game composer myself, I find Yasunori Nishiki's music to be an incredible reminder of what a great soundtrack can do to elevate video game stories to a new level, and a benchmark that I should always strive toward. And considering that he's even younger than I am, players should have plenty of great songs to look forward to in the future!

Even if you don't play the game, you should listen to its soundtrack! It's available in several places online! **– MATTHEW T.**

9.5

Embark on a Musical Journey

THEATRHYTHM FINAL BAR LINE

IT'S A WELL-REGARDED fact that the first Final Fantasy game you ever play tends to be your favorite. This means many patrons of the long-running series may not have found themselves branching out to try other entries or spin-offs – but there's never been a better case for filling in the gaps than Theatrhythm Final Bar Line!

This fourth entry in the quietly niche Theatrhythm series brings the rhythm gameplay of the arcade version (informed by the original 3DS games) home, for something that feels a little bit less like a museum of Final Fantasy and more of a celebration. With over 300 songs available to play (before DLC), Final Bar Line puts the compositions of legendary series composers front and center, with every mainline game represented – along with tracks from detours like Crystal Chronicles, mobile games and even arrangements from Super Smash Bros. Ultimate and cover bands.

Smash is actually a pretty apt comparison here, since the campaign and meta-loop focuses on forming a party using characters from almost every title featured in the game. Once you start to dig into it, there's a deeply engaging framework building a strong party with magic and support in mind to work through minor bonus sub-goals. As each song progresses, your party will automatically defeat enemies and unearth treasure, but if you're just here to play the hits, this element is fairly easy to ignore in favor of assembling a team of just your favorite heroes and villains.

If you were worried about how the original touchscreen controls translate to a traditional controller, don't fret – after playing a few songs, tapping the buttons and sliding the analog sticks feels just as natural, with some pretty well-balanced difficulty modes to suit both novice and expert rhythm gamers. Though, be warned: The highest difficulties require godlike reactions to read some of the more complicated high-speed charts.

The only major issue with the control scheme is feeling out the exact adjustment for the AV sync delay. This is a problem that has consistently plagued almost every rhythm game in the HD era, but should tweaking that prove too fiddly, swapping over into Handheld Mode provides an exceedingly precise experience, perfectly suited for the platform.

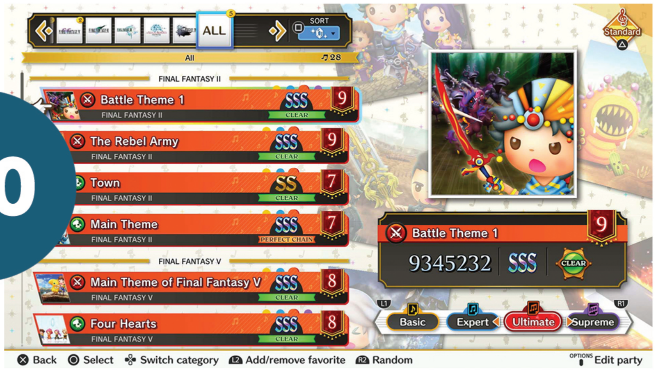
Final Bar Line is honestly one of the most feature-rich games Square has put out in years. There are so many ways to play depending on your mood, including local co-op across the board and an online mode to see who can hit the highest score while dodging attacks from incessant items thrown by other players. Unlocking more content – musical and cosmetic – does require playing through the campaign, however.

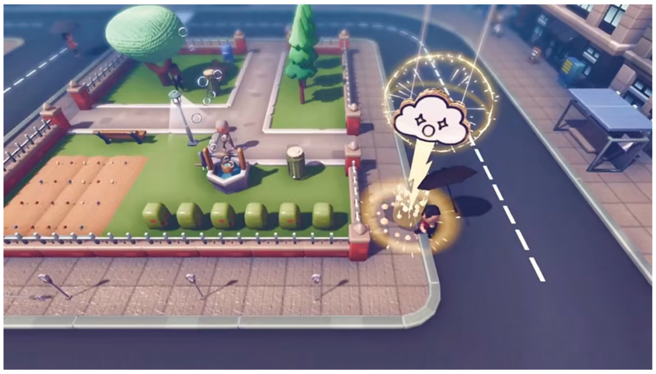
By getting halfway through a game's setlist, you gain a key that can be used to unlock another entry of your choice, rinse and repeat. In setting a metered pace to the player's approach to content, Final Bar Line cleverly avoids the pitfall of many rhythm games that offer hundreds of songs . . . only to find yourself replaying three or four favorites over and over. It's a great way to guarantee you'll check out most of the tracks and maybe even find some new favorites from Final Fantasies you may have only glanced over in the past.

With the promise of at least two season passes on the way, it'll definitely be exciting to see which classic songs make the cut moving forward. Most of these tracks so far focus on music from other Square games, including NieR and Octopath Traveler, with the only downside being the notable absence of characters from these games that could be added as party members. But even without buying DLC content, there's enough here to keep rhythm fans busy for weeks. Final Bar Line emerges as a surprisingly quintessential rhythm Switch title that's frankly impossible to imagine journeying away from home without! **– JOHN-CHARLES**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: SQUARE ENIX RATING: T

9.0





Old Man Yells at Cloud

RAIN ON YOUR PARADE

ALONGSIDE THE PHYSICAL copy of Wunderling DX that I reviewed in our last issue, the good folks over at Premium Edition also sent along a cart containing this happy-go-lucky romp of a game. Rain on Your Parade casts you as a simple cloud, then tasks you to ruin the days of any "hoomans" unfortunate enough to pass underneath your looming shadow.

The new tangible box wrapping around this adventure declares it to be "an adorable schadenfreude game," and that's an apt descriptor – it's a game all about having fun by causing, then laughing at, the misery of others. You drench a campsite to put out the campfires of people just minding their own business. You crash a birthday party by soaking all the kids (and then burning all the presents). You even venture into interior venues where a cloud would normally never cause concern, in order to do things like wreck a restaurant or flood an entire school full of students.

All of this happens very simply, as the gameplay of Rain on Your Parade is largely centered on slowly moving your cloud character around small areas and then pressing the A Button whenever you want some rain to fall. It's the kind of game that's perfectly accessible for players of any age, even with its E10+ rating seeming to discourage younger kids from giving it a go. It's fine, though. The only part a younger player might miss out on is reading the requirements for how to succeed in a given level, but even then the general strategy of "rain on everything and destroy as much as you can" will earn you victory 90% of the time.

After an opening string of stages that are entirely winnable with only Cloudy's default power to rain on stuff, though, the gameplay does slowly begin to expand with other mechanics. You come across levels in which you must change the nature of your rain – for example, hovering over a toxic waste spill to absorb a bunch of fumes and turn your clean water into acid rain instead. (Then using that to kill a field full of crops, or corrode a bunch of vehicles' paint jobs.) You can make your cloud rain oil instead of water from time to time, leading to simple puzzles where you have to set things on fire. There's even at least one level where your rain turns into coffee, so you can fill the mugs of thirsty office workers!

That level is actually a direct riff on The Office, perfectly replicating the layout of the setting of that sitcom. Other levels poke fun at video games like Metal Gear Solid or The Legend of Zelda – it's clear the developers had a lot of fun just goofing around and creating silly scenarios after they got all the mechanics established here.

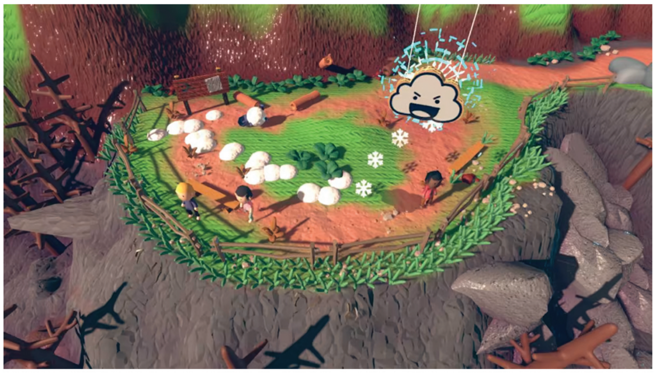
But more about those mechanics! Cloudy gains further weather control powers as you go, like the ability to zap things with bolts of lightning at will, the power to snow instead of rain, which causes slick ice to spawn on the ground (making for extra havoc) and the wind-whipping power to summon localized whirlwinds as well, for the times when you need to turn things tornadic. You also gain control of a black hole at one point? I don't think I'd classify that as "weather," but it's more silly fun, so it's tossed in.

And that's what Rain on Your Parade is all about: pure, silly fun. If games like Donut County or What the Golf got you or your kids smiling in the past, this is another of that same type of experience to consider.

The base game is only $14.99 when downloaded through the eShop, but if you splurge for a physical edition, you also get extra DLC content (sold for $22.99 on its own) included on the cartridge. Premium Edition's standard release ships with a dog tag, challenge card and full-color instruction manual, and then stepping up to the "Retro Edition" also nets you a drink coaster, an enamel pin and a set of vinyl cloud stickers. **— LUCAS**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: UNBOUND CREATIONS
RATING: E10+

8.0



Getting Familiar

BAYONETTA ORIGINS: CEREZA AND THE LOST DEMON

WHEN NINTENDO ANNOUNCED they were publishing Bayonetta 2 in 2012, it sent shockwaves through the games community. Would the all-ages publisher lead Sega and Platinum's famous gun shoe-wearing witch to tone down her sexy and sassy ways? Ten years later, we can answer that question with a definitive "Yes," though it didn't happen overnight. While Bayonetta 2 was as audaciously M-rated as the original, the third title let you turn off most of its mature content (except for the copious count of curse words), and this fourth iteration of the character goes in an even softer direction. It's the first entry in the series that's rated T for Teen!

Appropriately enough, Bayonetta Origins takes place hundreds of years ago, when Bayonetta was a 15-year-old girl named Cereza. Like many children, she tends to blame herself for the things that have gone wrong in her life, and goes out of her way to not cause any more trouble. She's the kind of kid who's more likely to practice ballet dancing in a mirror than fantasize about firing bullets from her feet. So for longtime fans, this "Baby-netta" may be borderline unrecognizable as she consistently refrains from punching, kicking or taking off a lick of clothing for the entirety of her approximately 20-hour journey.

You could say that if Bayonetta 3 was Cereza's equivalent to Super Mario Odyssey, then this is her Captain Toad: Treasure Tacker – an environmental puzzle game set in a cozy, toy-like world. But this sorceress doesn't care about gold stars. Instead, she opposes an army of fairies in a huge, labyrinthine forest, in search of the magic she needs to save her mother.

Bayonetta Origins' overall theme covers the experiences of children who are separated from their caretakers, and how they have to stick together to survive. At first you only control Cereza, who can timidly run, climb and cast simple, pacifistic spells to bind enemies or make plants grow. Her only allies in this world are Jeanne, her fiercely loyal friend, and Morgana, her mysterious mentor. But not long after things get rolling, she's joined by a demon cat named Cheshire. This is his origin story too, showing how he first learned to fight, and eventually, how to form a bond with his caretaker that's downright heartwarming.

The bulk of the game is made up of controlling these two simultaneously, exploring new areas and gaining new elemental powers as they go. The left Joy-Con is mapped to Cereza, who you'll want to keep away from fairies while using her magic to trap them. The right Joy-Con controls Cheshire, who starts off with simple bite and scratch attacks, but can later transform his tongue into a grappling hook, pound the earth with a rock-hard stomp, use his mouth like a fire hose and spit fire like a dragon. As you gain these abilities, the scrapes scale up in turn, shifting things more towards the character action genre. When Cereza grows more confident and independent, her game grows up with her, playing more like the adult-oriented adventures that take place later on in her timeline.

It's a beautiful story, told in a style that sits somewhere between Studio Ghibli's Princess Mononoke and Tim Burton's A Nightmare Before Christmas. And that's just a couple of the easier-to-spot influences on display here. About halfway through the plot, you discover Wisps, the ghosts of children who were trapped by fairies, doomed to spend eternity lost in the woods. They look like a cross between the Koroks from Zelda and the rusty robots from NieR: Automata. And their home, an overgrown, broken-down playground outside of a cursed circus, is equally reminiscent of those two titles. Counting all the references to Bayonetta's three previous releases, plus some of Platinum and Nintendo's other hits, is a big part of the meta Bayonetta Origins experience.

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: PLATINUMGAMES
RATING: T

But overall, this game feels like it was designed to be an entry point for younger players who are new to the franchise. The difficulty is shockingly low. While the overworld is large and mazelike, the tracks of a ghostly wolf constantly appear on-screen, and following them always takes you where you need to go. And though the fairies come in as many flavors as the angels, demons and homunculi did in Bayo's prior outings, the only times I needed to use a healing item were in the last few boss battles (which are as big and bold as one could hope for), and during an optional extra chapter where you play as an alternate character. Other than that, I only risked death in a few instant-kill spots, mostly found in psychedelic mini-dungeons called the Tír Na Nóg.

Being too easy isn't a problem at the beginning, when everything feels new and different, or at the end when the combat kicks into high gear. But in the middle, you mostly just mosey from place to place, and it's a little understimulating. By and large, you can romp through this prequel without breaking a sweat.

Before now, I thought I'd seen Bayonetta do it all, but Origins is the first time she's been this innocent, kid-friendly and, at times, a bit boring. But the slow parts are balanced out by the exciting art direction, fantastic voice acting, wide breadth of mechanics and a story that elevates its source material while working as a touching, standalone fairy tale. Let's hope this isn't the last we see of Cereza the Teenage Witch. – **JONATHAN**

8.0

9.5

The Brothers are Brilliant on the Big Screen

THE SUPER MARIO BROS. MOVIE

THE MOST RECENT Mario Day (a.k.a. March 10) happened to fall on a Friday. Since Friday is always family movie night in the Thomas home, I had the perfect pick for my kids to experience for the first time ever: the old live-action Super Mario Bros. movie from 1993. I figured seeing it in advance of the opening of Illumination's new animated effort would help them more properly appreciate what was sure to be a much more polished and accurate adaptation.

. . . Well, the DVD player didn't work.

Perhaps fate meant to spare my sons from the horror of seeing Dennis Hopper de-evolve into a dinosaur. Perhaps they were always supposed to see the new 2023 film first. Perhaps because I was trying to play the Super Mario Bros. movie on a PlayStation, Sony had simply built in some kind of protection against the exhibition of the opposition's IPs. Whatever the case, my boys still haven't seen the old movie – which is just as well. Now this wonderful new one can live in their memories as their first Mario movie experience!

I know we already presented a "Film Club" roundtable discussion about The Super Mario Bros. Movie earlier in this same issue, but for the sake of being able to assign it an official review score (and for me to offer my own thoughts in addition to those already shared), here is this separate Reviews section evaluation.

My opinion? I thought it was spectacular.

There were so many different levels on which I was able to experience and enjoy this movie. I could appreciate it as a decades-long Nintendo fan, smiling at the overwhelming amount of references packed into nearly every single scene. I expected plenty of nods to different Mario series games, of course, but I didn't think they'd throw in so many cameos for other franchises and their characters. There was a poster for Ice Climber on Mario's bedroom wall! I mean, come on. That's going above and beyond to win me over.

I could appreciate this film as someone who was a kid when that old live-action Mario movie made its debut 30 years ago. The contrast in quality between that one and this one is extreme. (Yet I can still enjoy the campiness of the '93 effort.)

I could appreciate Illumination's work purely in recognition of their fantastic animation. Characters were wildly expressive, moved hilariously and constantly warped their proportions when getting slapped around or banged against the inner walls of clear pipes. 3D animated movies have come a long way in just the last few years, it feels like.

And, most of all, I could appreciate The Super Mario Bros. Movie as a father. I got to sit and watch this movie while holding hands with my wife, two of our sons sitting to our left and two more sitting to our right. How incredible it must have been for them, to still be in their formative years and to see such an accurate and respectful adaptation of their favorite video games play out on the big screen. Cooper and Colson had never even been to a movie in a theater before! This was their very first moviegoing experience. That's incredible.

OK, OK, I'm supposed to be reviewing the movie here, I suppose.

Storywise it was largely what I expected, except the setting of Brooklyn got more of an emphasis than I figured it would, bookending the adventure at both the beginning and the end. I also thought that once they set out together, Mario, Peach and Toad would have more of a journey and visit more places than they did – my prediction in my preview last time was that they'd have more of a road trip kind of a quest and end up recruiting allies from several kingdoms to battle Bowser, but instead they just went straight to the Kongs and skipped over everyone else.

I guess there wasn't time for any other characters, because this movie's pacing absolutely flew. The plot zipped by faster than Mitchflowerpower speedrunning Super Mario Bros. 3 – I don't think there was a single scene that didn't advance the story. Bam! Luigi gets caught. Bam! Mario meets the Princess. Bam! She puts him to the test on the training course. There was never really any time given to the characters to just breathe and take in the world around them – it was go, go, go all the way through to the credits.

I guess that's part of this being a movie primarily made for kids, though, and needing to get through all it has to say and do in as close to 90 minutes flat as possible. With everything now established, though, it means that future sequels will have more of an opportunity to slow the pace down and go deeper with these characters.

And by golly, will there be sequels! The movie has only been in theaters for three weeks as we're finalizing this issue, so we'll wait until our next issue to report more detailed financial results. But we already know that it's managed to have *the biggest opening weekend ever for an animated film!* That is truly insane. I mean, I figured it would do well, but jetting straight to #1 and knocking off every movie that even Disney has ever done?! Way to go, Mar-i-o!

I'm thrilled. I'm thrilled this movie exists. I'm proud to be a Nintendo fan, and to be a Dad raising the next generation of Nintendo fans too! **– LUCAS**

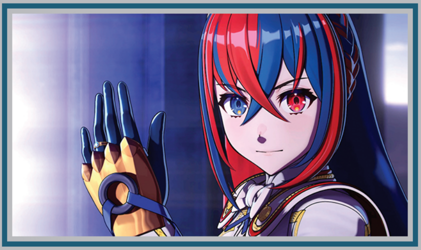
MOVIE DISTRIBUTED BY: UNIVERSAL PICTURES PRODUCTION BY: UNIVERSAL PICTURES, ILLUMINATION & NINTENDO RATING: PG

ARCHIVE

The complete list of Nintendo Force retail reviews from the last two years. Scores reflect individual reviewers' opinions.

SWITCH

TITLE	SCORE	REVIEWER	ISSUE
Ace Angler: Fishing Spirits	6.5	Rebecca	#63
AI: The Somnium Files – nirvanA Initiative	8.0	Tony	#62
Alex Kidd in Miracle World DX	7.5	David	#54
Atari 50: The Anniversary Celebration	9.5	Kris	#64
Atelier Sophie 2: The Alchemist of the Mysterious Dream	8.0	Maggie	#59
Balan Wonderworld	5.0	Lucas	#52
Bayonetta 3	9.0	Jonathan	#63
Big Brain Academy: Brain vs. Brain	8.0	Kris	#58
Blue Reflection: Second Light	8.5	Maggie	#57
Bravely Default II	9.0	Nadia	#52
Bugsnax	8.5	Lucas	#61
Capcom Fighting Collection	9.0	Jonathan	#61
Crash Bandicoot 4: It's About Time!	8.5	David	#52
Cris Tales	6.5	Maggie	#57
Cruis'n Blast	8.0	David	#56
DC Super Hero Girls: Teen Power	7.0	Kris	#53
Digimon Survive	8.0	Maggie	#63
Doki Doki Literature Club Plus!	8.5	Rebecca	#55
Dragon Ball Z: Kakarot	6.0	Kris	#56
Dragon Quest Treasures	8.0	Matthew T.	#64
Fire Emblem Engage	8.5	Rebecca	#64
Fire Emblem Warriors: Three Hopes	8.0	Rebecca	#61
G.I. Joe: Operation Blackout	6.5	Lucas	#54
Harvestella	8.0	Nadia	#63
Hot Wheels Unleashed	7.5	Lucas	#56
JoJo's Bizarre Adventure: All-Star Battle R	6.5	Tony	#62
Kirby and the Forgotten Land	10	Lucas	#59
LEGO Star Wars: The Skywalker Saga	9.0	Thor	#59
LIVE A LIVE	8.5	Rebecca	#61
Mario + Rabbids Sparks of Hope	9.0	Lucas	#63
Mario Golf: Super Rush	9.0	Lucas	#54
Mario Party Superstars	8.5	Lucas	#57
Mario Strikers: Battle League	7.5	Lucas	#60
Metroid Dread	9.0	Tony	#56
Metroid Prime Remastered	10	Lucas	#64
Miitopia	7.5	Brett	#53
MLB The Show 22	8.5	Dan	#59
Monster Hunter Rise	9.0	Lucas	#52
Monster Hunter Stories 2: Wings of Ruin	9.0	Maggie	#54
NEO: The World Ends with You	8.0	Rebecca	#55
NERF Legends	4.0	Lucas	#57
New Pokémon Snap	9.0	Lucas	#53
Ni no Kuni II: Revenant Kingdom – Prince's Edition	8.5	Brett	#56
Nickelodeon All-Star Brawl	7.5	Brett	#56
Nickelodeon Kart Racers 3: Slime Speedway	8.0	David	#63
No More Heroes III	9.5	Jonathan	#55
Pac-Man Museum+	8.5	Kris	#60
Pac-Man World Re-Pac	7.5	Lucas	#62
Persona 5 Strikers	9.0	Maggie	#52
Pokémon Brilliant Diamond	6.5	Rebecca	#57
Pokémon Legends: Arceus	9.0	Lucas	#58
Pokémon Scarlet	8.5	Lucas	#63
Pokémon Shining Pearl	6.0	Lucas	#57
Pokémon Violet	8.5	Lucas	#63
R-Type Final 2	7.5	Jonathan	#53
Record of Lodoss War: Deedlit in Wonder Labyrinth	8.0	Jonathan	#60
Rune Factory 5	7.5	Maggie	#59
Shadowverse: Champion's Battle	8.0	Maggie	#55
Shin Megami Tensei V	8.0	Meghan	#57
Sonic Colors: Ultimate	5.0	Kris	#58
Sonic Frontiers	7.0	Tony	#64
Splatoon 3	9.0	Lucas	#62
Story of Seasons: Pioneers of Olive Town	6.5	Rebecca	#53
Super Monkey Ball: Banana Mania	8.5	David	#56
Taiko no Tatsujin: Rhythm Festival	8.0	J.-Charles	#63
Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Shredder's Revenge	10	Lucas	#60
Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: The Cowabunga Collection	9.0	David	#62
The Caligula Effect 2	8.0	Maggie	#58
The Great Ace Attorney Chronicles	9.0	Rebecca	#54
The Legend of Heroes: Trails from Zero	9.0	Maggie	#62
The Legend of Heroes: Trails of Cold Steel IV	9.0	Maggie	#52
The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword HD	9.0	Lucas	#54
Transformers: Battlegrounds	7.5	Lucas	#54
Triangle Strategy	9.0	Nadia	#59
WarioWare: Get It Together!	7.5	Rebecca	#56
World's End Club	6.5	Kris	#55
Wunderling DX	8.0	Lucas	#64
Xenoblade Chronicles 3	10	Maggie	#62
Ys IX: Monstrum Nox	9.0	Lucas	#55



SECOND OPINION
FIRE EMBLEM ENGAGE

AFTER THE DARK and dramatic experience that was Fire Emblem: Three Houses, I'll admit I was surprised when Fire Emblem Engage was first revealed. It looked like a total 180! It showcased previous Fire Emblem heroes and mechanics. Plus, it had such vibrant colors and characters – most notably protagonist Alear, who sported bright red-and-blue hair and was dubbed Pepsi-chan and Toothpaste-kun by fans. After completing the game, however, I agree with Rebecca's assessment in her review from Issue #64, that instead of Engage leaning more towards the older or newer entries of the tactical series, it combines the best of both worlds!

The most notable example of this is the Engage mechanic itself. The story involves gathering 12 Emblem Rings to defeat the Fell Dragon Sombron. These rings allow you to summon heroes from past Fire Emblem games, like Marth, Ike, Celica, etc. The mechanic provides both a trip down memory lane and a new element of strategy, as the emblems offer their own special powers when paired up with other units.

Engage supplies another great addition to combat via the Break status, which goes hand-in-hand with the Weapon Triangle. If you have the weapon advantage, you can inflict Break on an enemy and negate any counterattacks until their next turn. This new mechanic can often make or break (pun intended) your turns in battle, and I appreciated the challenge and planning it required!

Engage also excels via its presentation, as its colorful world and characters all dazzle on screen. The cast are more than just pretty faces, too! I enjoyed getting to know them via support scenes that sported a wide emotional range. One minute, I was listening to a character sing about ghosts, and the next, I watched two siblings discuss how their parents abandoned them. These moments helped Engage's story hit harder. While it struggled at times with its pacing, the narrative's focus on familial ties and friendship held true with these characters.

Engage featured just the right combo of series staples and innovation, and I can't wait to see how its experience is built upon in future entries! **– MAGGIE**

8.5 REBECCA

9.0 MAGGIE

COMMUNITY

VIDEO GAME ART PRESERVATION

Interview with an Archivist

Melora Hart's History of Hyrule reaches back into the past to rediscover the Zelda art of yesteryear!

ZELDA'S LEGEND CONTINUES to grow, as we're now over 37 years deep into the development of the series. With a timeline already that long, and the brand branching out to encompass many more forms of media beyond just its video games, there's a whole lot of Zelda-related material out in the world that many fans have never seen! In particular the artwork – both official and unofficial – made to represent and promote the series' earliest installments. So on the verge of the release of the newest Zelda adventure, we sat down for a chat with one of the Legend's most dedicated lorekeepers, who's committed to bringing that art back into the light!

NF: First up, could you introduce yourself for our readers, and tell them what it is that you do?
MELORA: Hi! My name is Melora Hart. I'm a salty old disabled forest witch who loves art and this community. I hike, I paint and I've spent over 20 years working on Zelda art and publications to help everyone know about how big the world of Hyrule actually is. I'm essentially a curator who scans, tracks down, repairs and organizes a gallery and library. I used to do a lot of fan art hosting, encouragement and events. I work on finding translators for the non-localized material so people can experience it. I have led community efforts that have resulted in things like getting the Akira Himekawa manga localized outside of Japan and doing the big push for Hyrule Historia to be localized and hyped so Nintendo could see that fans really did want something like that! I had always pushed for an artbook, but we need even more for the older games in the series!

When did you start archiving Zelda art? And why did you choose to focus on the Zelda series in particular?
2002 is when I started my site, but I was in the community before that and would do little things here and there. I chose Zelda because I played the first game back in the mid-'80s, and at the heart of it is exploration, just like my heart, so it always stuck with me. With A Link to the Past I got hooked, and Katsuya Terada's art only cemented that. I wanted to get his art online. I wanted more people to know about the manga and fan comics, and I wanted to get scans to artists, researchers and theorists so more people could have even more fun with keeping this series so alive. I wanted more people to see how they could love the first few games.

Can you walk us through the process of archiving a piece of artwork?
It's kind of a "how to make your hobby sound boring" answer: You just want to treat the material well. Keep it in a low, or no, light room without moisture issues. De-bind it as safely as you can (how you do this depends on how it's bound), and then scan away. I do all the processing work in Photoshop. I don't use the scanner software – they tend to burn out the colors.

ARTWORK SCANNED & EDITED BY MELORA HART & ALBERTO VITALI

What's the hardest/most challenging part of doing this kind of work?
At this point? Finding it, paying for it, finding the time. There is so much that is still missing, but as collecting has taken off, it's gotten really expensive to just find one copy to use to preserve everything for everyone. Magazines I could get for $3 just a few years ago are now sometimes $300!

What's the most popular piece you've ever uploaded, and why do you think it went over so well?
Easily the pink-haired female Link from 1986. I'm glad it went over so well, too, because I have personally always wanted Zelda as a playable character with a strong role, and used to get a lot of really intense hate for that – like that I would be the destruction of the series for merely uttering the thought out loud, and so I couldn't possibly be a real fan! So seeing how joyous people were to realize that there was imagery for a female hero as early as the series' first game – that was an incredible moment. People who relate to that art can see themselves in the series from such an early era, to show that it really has always been open to personal interpretation. It was an anti-gatekeeping moment for a lot of people. And finding it in an official publication, not just Shonen Captain where the original famous photo of it came from, really was an incredible moment, too, for my mission to preserve art and expand on the world of Hyrule!

Is there a piece you stumbled upon that really amazed you, but when you shared it with the community, the reception wasn't as big as you expected?
I found missing official art from Zelda II: The Adventure of Link. They were enemies that should have been in the manual, but were not. They were only in an official magazine prior to release, and then a compilation feature where some of the colors were changed. I'm wondering if the original pieces got lost or damaged before the manual was printed. Anyway, it was crickets, but it doesn't matter because it made me and a few fellow AoL fans so happy. I can barely even explain how happy I will be about that moment forever! It's no longer at risk of being lost forever.

The Zelda series has been going for over 37 years now, and over that time a lot of different art styles have been used. Which era of games, or which Link/Zelda in particular, do you feel are the purest representation of the heart of the series?
The purest art and game that is the heart of this series is the fan art, fiction, comics, music, mods and theories. I feel that there is no heart of the series when it comes to official art or a particular game. It has spanned such a great length of time, and has gone through so many interpretations, that it's become what it is to each of us who loves it. So everyone's favorite game, the "truest or purest" game, their favorite piece of art, is going to be very personal. And it's going to encourage each individual to create their own enthusiasm. That spreads the love of those aspects to other fans and that ends up making us all love the series even more as a whole. The heart of Zelda is the creativity and enjoyment of the player.

The first few Zelda games seemed to explicitly show the existence of Christianity in the world of Hyrule – then, after A Link to the Past, the series shifted to its own religious lore with the likes of the Goddesses and Hylia. Have you observed that transition in the artwork over the early years? And are there other major trends in the artwork you've observed since the franchise started?
It's not surprising. In the '80s, when I grew up, there was a lot of localized anime on TV that showed a strong trend toward Euro-centric themes in Japanese entertainment culture directed toward children or families. Fairy tales, pastoral European villages and lives, knights, crusades, colonization. Unico, Kimba, Superbook, Grimm's Fairy Tale Classics, Belle and Sebastian, The Mysterious Cities of Gold, etc. It was a genre. Trends shift. Just like how there was so much zombie media for a while and then, in the past few years, we've gotten a lot of viking shows.

THIS ARTWORK OF A PINK-HAIRED FEMALE LINK APPEARED IN A GAME MAGAZINE IN JAPAN IN 1986, PROVING FANS HAVE BEEN HOPING FOR A FEMALE HERO IN THE SERIES FROM THE VERY START!

There really isn't anything in dev interviews and art that shows any thought going toward it. Very little in the art: Only a handful of pieces out of thousands even allude to it. No different than having a Tower of Hera or Venus, Queen of the Faeries. In the early games, story was an afterthought. Tanabe and Koizume were responsible for sneaking in story for A Link to the Past – they were kind of told to not bother much.

The only true trend with the series that I have noticed is the one the devs actually seem to discuss: a focus on driving gameplay and allowing the player to feel that Link is the vessel they are in. So I think, mainly, the series has been left open to interpretation and that's why we all find so many themes. The earliest games, and Breath of the Wild, have always been both open for world and imaginative exploration. I love the loose structure that has given all of this room to play with the lore.

If someone reading this wanted to get started as an archivist, what should their first steps be? (I'm actually interested in upgrading my own scanner to be able to better bring pieces of the past back into the present like you do! What model do you use?)

My advice is to just start! When I started, no one else was doing what I ended up doing. I had no idea what I was doing. I just saw a gap in content in an area that interested me. Filling that gap ended up helping in other areas, and what other people were doing ended up helping me do what I did. But most people learn better if they learn as they go. So find a group (Gaming Alexandria is a good one for games in general, a lot of series besides Zelda need some help), or look around, or ask in that group what niche needs to be filled. Then go for it!

It's like with all the Champions: We're all going to be better at different things based on the differences in who we are, but we can use those differences to build some amazing things together. The best thing you can be if you want to help the community is be a person who does what you love while encouraging others to do what they love. Build each other up. That should be the very first step and influence every step along the way.

But technically speaking, I have a simple guide on my site. An Epson Perfection V600 is a good flatbed that isn't completely price-prohibitive. And then please be sure to use a black backing if you scan double-sided pages, so the images or text on the reverse side don't bleed through! Don't scan lower than 600dpi, but you don't need to go over 2400dpi for printed images.

We're on the verge of the release of Tears of the Kingdom. Are you hyped for it? What do you think of the artwork we've seen promoting it so far?

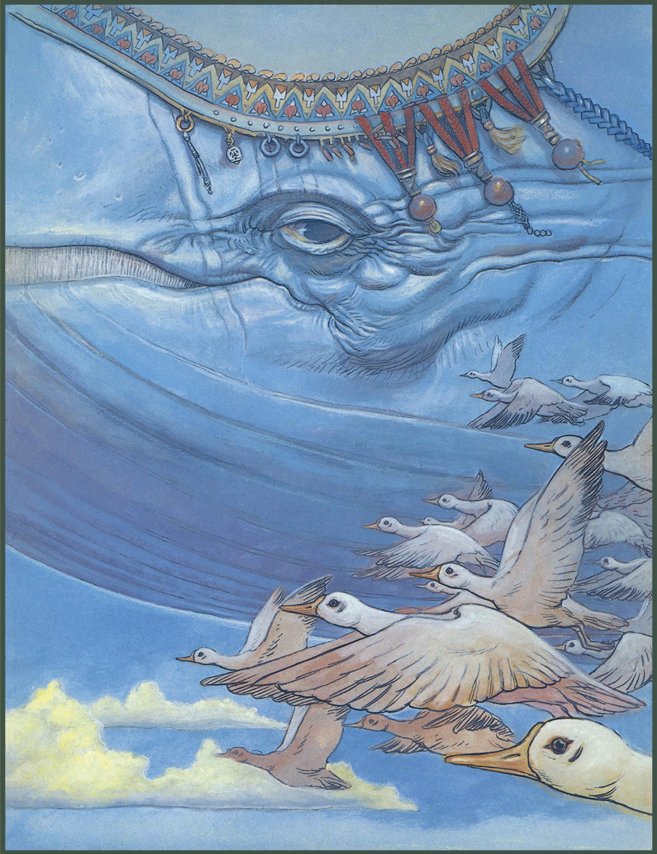
I am so hyped for it that I'm actually on a total media blackout! If I see visuals I start waiting for them to appear in the game – then I start getting confused if I don't see them, like I think maybe I'm missing an area or an event. Ocarina of Time was actually really confusing for me, because I was trying to find the areas that had been shown early in magazine previews but hadn't actually made the final cut. Then Twilight Princess had me hyped past realistic expectations. I went into Breath of the Wild almost blind, and it was such an incredible experience! It was kind of like playing the first game again for the first time. With any luck I'll get some of that same feeling from not knowing much about Tears of the Kingdom. (I've only watched the first trailer.)

Finally, what's next for History of Hyrule?

Like the original Hyrule Fantasy, all the way to Breath of the Wild, I'm just going to keep doing the same things I've always done. And, oddly, that means there will be a lot of new things we've never seen before!

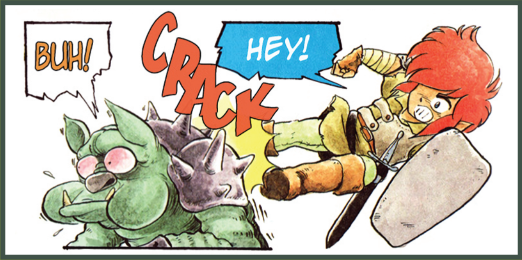
HistoryofHyrule.com

INTERVIEW BY LUCAS M. THOMAS & JONATHAN HOLMES



ONLY A FEW EXAMPLES!
ZELDA ART OF EVERY KIND

We've printed half a dozen pieces here and on the preceding pages in order to illustrate Melora's work as a Legend of Zelda series artwork archivist, but these are all barely scratching the surface! Zelda fans, I highly recommend you spend some time browsing the full galleries found at HistoryofHyrule.com, as you'll discover art from old official Nintendo guidebooks, wildly obscure Japanese manga and much, much more. Treat your eyes to a visual feast!



NEXT ISSUE

The grand, epic, sweeping adventure of **The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom** is sure to dominate Nintendo gaming discourse over the next few months (and beyond), but don't let the biggest quest of the year fully distract you from the small-scale fun that will follow it! **Pikmin 4** will bring us all back down to earth in July, and we'll hold a magnifying glass up to all its possibilities in our upcoming 66th edition. Make sure you don't miss our up-close look at the little guys!

IN THE WORKS FOR ISSUE #66:

PIKMIN 4

THE HISTORY OF **PIKMIN**

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: TEARS OF THE KINGDOM **REVIEWED!**

METROID PRIME 4

FIRE EMBLEM ENGAGE EXPANSION PASS

XENOBLADE CHRONICLES 3 EXPANSION PASS

AN INTERVIEW WITH **HOWARD PHILLIPS** - NINTENDO'S ORIGINAL GAMEMASTER

THE SUPER MARIO BROS. MOVIE BOX OFFICE RESULTS & ANALYSIS

DISNEY ILLUSION ISLAND

SUPER BOMBERMAN R 2

MELON JOURNEY: BITTERSWEET MEMORIES

AND MUCH **MORE!**

JULY/ AUGUST 2023

AT THE MARIO MOVIE!

IT'S THE OBLIGATORY Thomas family photo snapped outside the theater just after we finished watching The Super Mario Bros. Movie! You all know how I like to use these final pages to chronicle the developments in my kids' gaming lives, and this is one moment you knew we weren't going to miss.

While Baby Chance took a long nap at Mamaw & Papaw's house (six months old being a little too young to appreciate the many delicate nuances of fine cinema), the rest of the Super Thomas Brothers joined Mary and myself for a Monday morning matinee of the Mario movie. We waited until just after the opening weekend came to a close in order to avoid the crowds, and sure enough only a handful of other people were present at our same showing! We basically had the place to ourselves.

We of course dressed for the occasion, and each of the boys got equipped with an appropriate cap and a stuffed character. (Waluigi might not have been *in* the movie, but he at least got to watch it with us!) Some highlights include the Luigi hat Cooper is wearing, which was made by my Mom to be part of my Halloween costume back in 1990, as well as the "Pillow Person" Mario I'm holding, which I've owned even longer — I believe it came into my possession in 1989. Just wanted to do whatever I could to link the magic of my own Mario-loving childhood together with the modern journey each of the boys is on! Wa-hoo! **— LUCAS**

Hyrule Health
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CLOSE YOUR EYES
HOW TO SLEEP FOR 100 YEARS
(AND WAKE UP FEELING REFRESHED!)
FEELING WITHERED? 10 TIPS FOR REHYDRATING YOUR BODY – FAST!
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